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THE NIGHT RAIDER



PARTLY TURNING IN HER SADDLE, THE MYSTERIOUS RAIDER RAISED THE WINCHESTER TO HER SHOULDER, AND FIRED WITH A QUICK AIM.

OR,

The Mysterious Marauder.

A Tale of the Cattle Corrals.

BY MAJ. DANIEL BOONE DUMONT,
OF THE U. S. A.

AUTHOR OF "SALAMANDER SAM," "THE OLD RIVER SPORT," "COLONEL DOUBLE-EDGE,"
"SILVER SAM, THE DETECTIVE,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A CATTLE RAID.

THE thunder of hoofs as a bunch of cattle swept forth from an opening in the hills of Southern Colorado, might have startled a stranger—supposing a stranger there to be startled—had it not been for the real thunder that rolled and muttered in the canopied vault overhead.

It was a lurid night, threatening to produce a scene of terrible grandeur, and that wild region, which had not been favored with a drop of rain in many weeks, had the promise of a down-pour of unusual magnitude.

The night was dark, but by no means at its darkest yet, though coming events were casting their shadows before very rapidly.

Clouds were flying across the sky as if hurrying to find a place of safety, and in the southwest there was a great black bank of them; but overhead and toward the north, the mass was as yet scattered, and the moon broke through them at intervals, shining very brilliantly when she was allowed to shine at all.

Apparently there was a stiff breeze up above, but not a breath of air near the surface of the earth, where the atmosphere was so close as to be almost stifling.

The thunder, which had been muttering and growling in the distance for some time, was just beginning to be discharged in artillery volleys when the bunch of cattle broke forth from the opening in the hills.

It was not a big bunch—only six or eight steers, though it would have puzzled anybody but an expert to count even that small number as they swept through the shadows of the rocks, and under the shadows of the tall trees, galloping madly with tails erect, hurrying as the clouds hurried, as if to seek a place of safety.

Like the clouds, the cattle were urged forward with an apparently irresistible force; but, unlike the clouds, they had not free scope for their flight, their course being controlled by the nature of the ground, as well as guided by the force that impelled them.

As the last of the bunch emerged from the darkness of the hills, and began to gallop at headlong speed down the wooded slope, the impelling force made its appearance in the persons of two riders, a young man and a young woman—though it would have been difficult to distinguish the young woman from the young man, but for the fact that the former rode a side-saddle.

When they had passed through the wooded ground to the level and treeless plain beyond, their personal characteristics became more plainly visible in the occasional bursts of moonlight as well as in the intermittent flashes of lightning.

The young man was a very young man—scarcely beyond his majority, to judge by his boyish and almost beardless face—but was tall for his age, well formed, well knit, evidently sinewy and athletic, and he rode a splendid bay horse as if he formed part of the beautiful animal.

He was dressed in a mixture of the Mexican and American garb, his short jacket with an abundance of metal buttons being of the Mexican style, as was also his heavy sombrero; but his corduroy trousers and the high boots that partly covered them belonged to the fresher and more aggressive race.

The young woman was a little older than her companion—perhaps two or three years older—and was strikingly interesting, if not really handsome.

People who admire the placid and homelike style in woman might not have been favorably impressed by her regular features, her somewhat sunburned face, and the hard, defiant expression that occasionally settled on her countenance; but many others would have called her beautiful as they gazed on her lithe and graceful form and noted the fire that shone, sometimes in lightning flashes, from her large dark eyes.

She, too, rode her horse, a powerful black mare, as if she had been born to ride, sitting erect, and holding her bridle rein loosely with a finger of her left hand, as if she did not need to use it in guiding the animal.

It would seem that, so far as her garb was concerned, she was not compelled to the use of a side-saddle, but might have ridden man-fashion as well as not.

Her principal visible garment was a short frock of dark woolen stuff, so short that it might have been styled a tunic, beneath which were deerskin leggings, which terminated in short boots, much like those of a man.

Her short and curling brown hair was covered by a sombrero quite similar to that of her companion, and altogether her appearance was so mannish that her side-saddle seemed to be out of place.

Each of these had a Winchester rifle, carried in slings, so that their right arms might be free to use the long and heavy-handled whip with which the cattle were managed, and each was fully equipped for business with cartridge-belts and a revolver.

What was the business for which they were so amply prepared?

A hint of it might have been caught from the manner in which they urged the cattle to frantic speed—a quite unnecessary proceeding in a peaceable and lawful business—and very sharp ears might have caught a further hint from the clatter of horses' hoofs at a little distance behind them.

The cattle were flying before those two, and they were flying before a pursuing force which they had good reason to believe was not far in their rear.

In the darkness of the night, soon to grow deeper, and in the intricacies of the rough country just ahead of them, they might with their good horses easily have got out of the way of

their pursuers; but the cattle were an incumbrance.

However rapidly the steers might be urged forward, they could not be expected to outstrip well-mounted horsemen, and it seemed to be only a question of time that they should be overtaken by those who were pushing the pursuit.

Yet the two drivers were so far from being frightened that they did not appear to feel the least uneasiness concerning that very probable contingency.

They might have let the cattle go and turned aside to save themselves; but apparently they did not give head-room to such a thought.

As they passed out from the shelter of the trees, the young woman slackened the speed of her horse for an instant, and seemed to listen.

Even amid the volleys of thunder and the noise of the mad hoofs of the cattle, her quick ears caught the sounds of the approaching pursuit; but it did not even make her wince.

Her face grew harder, and her lips closed tighter, and there was a steely glitter in her dark eyes, as she swerved to the left and ranged her horse by the side of her companion.

"Keep them going, Jack," she ordered, "and I will catch up with you directly."

"What are you going to do, Vic?"

"I am going to take a shot at those scallawags, and teach them that it's bad manners to crowd."

"Shan't I try it, Vic?"

"Of course not. My nerve is better than yours, and so is my eyesight. Keep the critters going, Jack, and trust to me."

She looked as if she might be trusted for any deed of daring or skill as she slowed up her horse, dropping at once behind her companion, and let her blacksnake whip hang from her wrist by its thong.

Lifting her rifle from its slings, she cast a hasty glance backward.

She was then well out upon the plain, and from the wooded slope behind were emerging the dark forms of several horsemen, coming into plainer sight as the moon, for the last time that night, burst through a mass of clouds and shone brilliantly for an instant.

Of that instant she took a quick and deadly advantage.

Partly turning in her saddle, the Mysterious Raider raised the Winchester to her shoulder, and fired with a quick aim.

One of the pursuing horsemen fell from his saddle with a cry, and the others halted in confusion.

The girl gave the rein to her black mare, which needed no whip or spur, but dashed away at full speed, as if to outrun the few ineffectual shots that were fired from the edge of the timber.

When she overtook her comrade they had crossed the narrow plain, and the cattle were headed toward an opening in the hills beyond.

By this time the sky was covered with black masses of cloud, the thunder came in peals more frequent and more distinct, darkness of the thickest covered the earth as with a pall, and directly big drops of rain began to patter on the earth, tokens of the coming deluge.

"Reckon you made a coup, Vic," remarked Jack. "I am sure that I heard a squeal."

"Yes, I laid out one of them, and for keeps, I believe. If it was one of the Jonas tribe, either the old man or Herman, I am glad of it."

"That would count one in the score we have to settle, Vic."

"I hope it has counted one. We must keep on counting, Jack, until we wipe out the score."

"Give me a chance, and you shall see what I will do."

"Keep the cattle going, then. We are not yet safe, though we soon will be."

The rain began to fall in torrents, and the darkness was thick enough to cut with a knife, and then the raiders knew that they were safe, because the pursuers, stopped by the shot that had slain one of their number, had halted until the fugitives were out of hearing, as well as out of sight, and in the storm and darkness it would be useless to attempt to follow them further.

Jack and Vic were also beset by the storm and darkness, but regarded them as blessings without any disguise.

They knew the country well, and, although unable to see, they could feel their way or let their horses find it for them.

So the girl covered herself with a rubber cloth that had been strapped to her saddle, and they went forward slowly, keeping just at the heels of the cattle, which traveled quietly enough since the rain had begun to fall and they were no longer pushed by their drivers.

CHAPTER II.

THE JONAS RANCH.

THE Jonas Ranch was by all odds the largest as well as the most pretentious in the Oro Fino district.

The walls of the house were built solidly of stone, as if meant to endure forever, and in this they typified the purpose of the proprietor, Simon Jonas, who had established himself there with the view of possessing a large estate and

founding a family who should be kings and princes in the new land.

Therefore he had brought from a distant city the gains of a lucrative if none too honorable business, investing them in Uncle Sam's land, and striving by every possible means to increase the value of his investment.

Thus he had become an extensive owner of country and town property, mine interests and cattle, and what more could a man want?

Only one thing more—the respect, if not the friendship, of the people among whom he dwelt, and it seemed to be impossible for him to secure that, because he was a Jew.

This was not, perhaps, merely because he was a Hebrew, as few people in that region troubled themselves about a man's religion or the lack of it, but rather because of the Jewishness of his nature, partly inherited, and partly contracted in a trade that was calculated to confirm and increase it.

What did it profit him to be rich and powerful when any penniless vagabond could presume to look down upon him, and when his splendid estate and his fine house were generally known as Sheenytown?

The ranchmen and miners and rough mountaineers held such a contemptuous opinion of Simon Jonas, that he could not have been chosen to the lowest office in the gift of the people, and yet there could be no doubt that he was a good and useful citizen.

Thus it was that Simon Jonas, though he probably did not regret having been born a Jew, was greatly worried because he was known and spoken of as a Jew in that latitude, and would even have been willing to part with a considerable portion of his wealth if the unpleasant fact could thereby have been obliterated.

As he had lived many years in America, and as his German accent was not very pronounced, he wanted to pass himself off as American born, and disclaimed his Hebrew descent; but the decidedly Jewish features of his wife and his daughter Rebecca, together with the unmistakable pawnshop proclivities of the former, "gave the snap away," as his son Isaac was in the habit of saying.

His sons, however, differed from the others in features as well as in disposition, and Simon Jonas would have been entirely satisfied with them, had it not been for the wildness of the younger, who had become quite too much of a Western American to suit his thrifty father.

The elder son, Herman, was a well grown young man of twenty-six, industrious, sober, careful, and so fond of looking after the main chance that the men about town in Oro Fino used to say that he had got himself stoop-shouldered in hunting dollars and dimes.

The younger son, Isaac, generally known as Ike Jonas, was a slim fellow of twenty-four, whose cadaverous face told of the late hours and dissipation, who preferred to spend dollars rather than to earn them, and whose time was mostly passed greatly to the sorrow of his frugal father, in the gaming-houses and possibly worse resorts of Oro Fino.

Men in that town, the same who objected to Herman's penuriousness, were wont to say that if Ike Jonas had not been the son of a wealthy father, he would be sure to have been hung or jailed for stealing.

Yet the disreputable Ike was the darling of his penny-wise mother, who was always ready to supply his extravagant wants when she could, greatly as it grieved her to part with the coins of the Republic.

The morning after the cattle raid which has been partially related, there was in Simon Jonas's house a consultation that partook of the qualities of a council of war.

Next to the proprietor and his son Herman, the chief person of the conclave was the foreman of the ranch, Ralph Harkness, a middle-aged man of stern appearance, who had gained such a character on the ranch as Western river steamboat mates usually receive from the deck-hands under them.

Simon Jonas's wife and daughter were there, too, also Ike, looking very seedy, as if he was suffering from the loss of sleep.

"As you say, Mr. Jonas," observed Harkness, "that cattle-stealing business is getting to be too durned extensive, and something ought to be done to stop it. I thought that the thieves would kinder let up after you hung Tom Halsey, as a sorter example, you know; but the let-up was only for a little while, and lately the thieving has been worse than ever."

"I don't see why they need keep on pitching into me," answered the old man. "It seems to me that I am the mark for the greater part of the stealing that is done, and I don't know why that should be, unless it's because I have more to lose than other men."

"Maybe you have hurt somebody who is in the business," suggested Harkness.

"I have done nothing, except when I helped to bring Halsey to justice, and that was my duty as a citizen."

"Perhaps some of his old pards, who didn't get caught, may think that you carried your duty as a citizen too far to suit them, and may be trying to get even with you."

"I wish I could find out who they are, and I

would do my share of getting even. Last night the scoundrels got away with several of my best steers that were worth a good bit of money, and they killed one of my men, too."

"No money loss in him, though," remarked Herman Jonas.

"But I hate to lose him in that way. Tim Flaherty was a good man, though a little too hasty and hot-headed. And you might have been the one to be shot down, Herman, as you ran the same risk that Flaherty did. If anything of the kind happens again, my son, I want you to stay at home and let somebody else chase the thieves. I can't afford to lose you, as Ike is of no manner of use in business."

"Why didn't they catch the thieves when they had got within shooting distance of them?" inquired the person last mentioned.

"Because we had to stop to pick up poor Flaherty," replied the foreman, "and because the storm broke just then, and the rain came down in torrents, and it was so dark that there was no use in trying to hunt anything."

"Never mind what Ike says," put in the proprietor. "If he had been at home, instead of getting himself skinned out of his dollars by the card-sharps at Oro Fino, he wouldn't need to ask questions."

To give point to this remark, Ike's father, who had been at home, proceeded to ask questions.

"Did you say, Ralph, that there were only two thieves with the bunch of cattle?"

"Only two that we could see. I believe that's all there were, and one of them was a woman."

"There must be some mistake about that. How was she dressed?"

"That was the one who fired on us and killed Flaherty. The moon showed up just then, and I had a pretty good look at her. She had on a sort o' short frock and a big sombrero."

"The sombrero gives her away, Ralph. She must have been a man masquerading in woman's clothes."

"She rode a side-saddle, anyhow, and rode it as if she was used to it."

"A man might do that."

"But a man wouldn't. Come, now, boss, that won't do at all. No man is going to ride a side-saddle if he can help it. It's bad enough for a woman to have it to do."

"I believe it was a woman, too," remarked Herman. "Whatever it was, though, the point is that we must do something to find out who the thieves are and bring them to justice."

"How are we to go to work to do that?" inquired the old man.

Herman had no solution of this problem ready, and Ralph Harkness undertook to answer it for him.

"Why don't you get a detective?" demanded the foreman.

"That sort of thing is expensive, and I am inclined to believe that the detectives are all frauds."

"Some of them may be, but all of them ain't. I know one—though I don't like the man a bit—who has no fraud about him, and he can hunt down those thieves and catch them if any man can."

"I will think about it, Ralph. I don't know but it may prove to be the best plan. Detectives come high, but cattle are worth money, too, and I don't want Herman to run any more risks. Since a murder has been committed by the thieves, there ought to be plenty of people to take a hand in running them down."

CHAPTER III.

THE HOLE IN THE GROUND.

ONLY a log cabin and a hole in the ground. Such was the home and such the estate, of two men who, as a stranger might have thought, should have been better housed and more profitably employed.

Yet the hole in the ground represented a possible fortune, and the little rude cabin was as good a house for those two as a palace could have been.

The younger but taller one, with the blue eyes and tawny beard, was the scion of an aristocratic family in England, who had come to the New World to carve out a fortune for himself, and this was the style in which he was doing the carving.

His name was Horace Exton, and nearly everybody considered him a splendid fellow, in spite of an occasional bit of British brusqueness.

The shorter but elder one, black-bearded and spectacled, was Carl Klein, a graduate of a German university, and a man of standing among scientific people, who had drifted out to Colorado, and had there joined hands with Horace Exton in the business of seeking a fortune.

As for the fortune, that was still in the ground, and they had been digging for it during many weary months; but it had not yet become visible, and there was plenty of room to doubt whether it ever would.

Both the proprietors of this estate of problematic value were attired in the regulation working costume of flannel shirt, trousers, high

boots and felt hat, and they were seated in front of the cabin, smoking their pipes after breakfast.

"I judge, Carl," Exton was saying, "by the vigorous style in which you stowed away the grub this morning, that you are feeling better."

"Physically I am quite well," answered the other.

"Physically, hey? Some kind of a proviso back of that, I suppose. You are well enough to go to work this morning, I hope?"

"I am not going into that hole again, Exton. I am tired of it. I have had enough."

Though the Englishman received this statement coolly and without change of countenance, his coolness was not due alone to British phlegm, but mainly to the fact that he had been looking for and expecting something of the kind, as his companion's indications of weariness had been for quite a while evident and increasing.

"I am sorry to hear you say that, Carl," said he. "I supposed that you were off color yesterday, but that you would be ready to go on with the work when you were well."

"I was sick yesterday, my friend; but it was the sickness of sorrow and disgust—sorrow for wasted time, and disgust with the empty results of so much labor. I haf to the conclusion come, my friendt"—when Klein got excited he always became rather Germanesque in his talk—"that there is nottings in dot hole. Sefen mont's we haf vorked at him, and he is no goot!"

"I saw good sign of color yesterday, Carl," suggested the Englishman, "and I think we will strike the vein soon."

"So you haf before said many times, and yet there is no vein. It is all time and labor thrown away. I am tired, weary, full with disgoot. I gif him up. I let him go. I leaf here."

"Where will you go to, Carl?"

"I go to Denver. There I will look for work as civil engineer. Many such are wanted, and who can do better work than Carl Klein?"

"Nobody, I am sure; but I am very sorry that you are going to leave me."

"Why should we part? You must go with me, Exton? There is plenty for you to do where I am going. Such men as you are always wanted. Why should you stay here and waste your days and your energies?"

Horace Exton was largely supplied with British pluck and perseverance. He was a man who did not know when he was beat, or he hated to own it if he did know it.

"I still believe that there is a fortune in that hole," said he. "We have worked at it so long that I can't bear to give it up unless I am sure that it is an absolute failure, and I am by no means sure that it is a failure."

"Perhaps it is not that alone which keeps you here," suggested the German.

"What else could it be?"

"That young woman at the Small Hopes Ranch—Victoria Halsey."

"I admit that I am interested in her; but that interest would not be strong enough of itself to keep me here."

"Are you sure of that—sure that you are not in love with her?"

"I am interested in her, as I said, but not so deeply as you seem to think."

"It would in England be considered a strange thing, my friend, if the heir of the Extons should fall in love with such a girl as Victoria Halsey."

"I am only a younger son, and even if I were the heir of the dignity and poverty of the Extons, I would not consider myself above any good and honest girl."

"It is well to say good and honest. You will remember that her father was hanged for cattle-stealing."

"And I am strongly inclined to believe that the deed was unfairly done—that the man was not guilty. Anyhow, his daughter is not a cattle-thief."

"I hope she is not, or anything else that is bad."

"I prefer that you should not insinuate anything against her, Carl."

"I will not, as I know nothing against her, except that she roams about alone, and at night, rather too much."

"That is true, and I mean to speak to her about it."

"You mean to stay here, then, Exton? If you are really so obstinate, I will make you a present of my share in that hole in the ground, in the cabin, in the tools, and in all the unpleasant reminders of seven lost months."

"What will we do with Lemon Squeezer? He belongs to us both. Will you give me your share in him, too?"

Limonado Schiezziera was an Italian who had been picked up by the partners when he was starving, and he belonged to them, or considered himself their property, officiating for them as house-servant and assistant miner. His baptismal appellation being a hard one to get hold of, he had become known in Oro Fino and the region thereabout as Lemon Squeezer, to which name he always answered with alacrity.

"Here he comes," said Klein. "Suppose we ask him what he wants to do."

Lemon Squeezer, who had been to fetch wood,

came forward, smiling upon his *padroni*, and the case was stated to him.

"We are going to dissolve partnership, Squeezer," said Exton. "Mr. Klein is going to Denver, and I am going to stay here and dig at that hole in the ground. Which would you rather do—go with Mr. Klein, or stay with me?"

The Italian gazed at the partners mournfully, shaking his head as if the problem was too tough for him.

"Betta go togedda—betta stay togedda," was all the answer he could muster.

"That won't work, *amico*. I am afraid that you will have to choose between us."

"Toss a coppa."

"I won't worry you any more, Squeezer. Let us hope for the best. I shall not accept your offer, Carl. You won't think of leaving here before to-morrow morning, I suppose. Give me this day for another pull at the hole, and to-night we will talk the matter over. If by that time I have nothing to show, I may go to Denver with you."

"Thanks, my friend; I shall count on having your company."

Exton and the Italian went to work at the hole in the ground, taking some food for their noonday lunch.

When the partners began work at that promising claim, some seven months ago, they had called it a mine, and had even given it a name; but since they had expended so much time and labor there with no satisfactory result, they had tacitly agreed to speak of it as the hole in the ground.

During their absence Carl Klein employed himself in preparing and packing such of his belongings as he meant to take with him; but there was little of that, and the task was soon finished.

Then he read a little in a volume that he nearly knew by heart, and managed to pass the time until noon, when he cooked a little lunch for himself; but there was no pleasure in eating alone, and he lacked appetite.

After lunch he smoked his pipe and walked about a little, but grew more restless all the time.

He heard a faint explosion in the direction of the hole in the ground, and it occurred to him that his partner had said that he meant to make a small blast; but there could be nothing of interest in that.

He would have gone to Exton and Lemon Squeezer, just for the sake of companionship, had he not contracted such a disgust for the hole in the ground that he hated the sight of it.

It represented blasted hopes as well as lost labor, and he had seen enough of it.

Thus he was much surprised as well as delighted when the two workers returned to the cabin before the close of the afternoon.

He wondered what had brought them back so soon, and noticed that Lemon Squeezer seemed to be in a vastly better humor than when he went to work.

Nothing in the way of elation or depression was visible in Exton's countenance; but his shirt bulged out rather suspiciously in front.

As Exton entered the cabin he cast a quick glance about the little room, and noticed what had been done there.

"I see that you have been getting ready to go, Carl," he observed.

"Yes, and I suppose that I shall have the pleasure of your company, as I hope that you have had enough of that hole in the ground by this time."

"I am not sure of that. I believe I will stay. By the way, Carl, as you are going to Denver, I wish that you would take something that I want to send there."

"Of course I will. Are you really not going with me, then?"

"I have thought the matter over, and I don't believe I am, though it is hard for such comrades as you and I have been to part."

"Yes, it is very hard, and I have been feeling that since you went away this morning. What is to become of Lemon Squeezer?"

"He has decided upon staying here."

"Very well. What is it that you wish me to take to Denver?"

"Here it is."

In the middle of the room was a small pine-table, stained and scored and dented by use, which had served the partners as a dining-table, a writing-table, and for other purposes.

Exton approached the table, opened his shirt, and let fall a number of pieces of broken quartz.

"I want you," he said, "if you are not above fooling with a little thing like that, to take these to Denver and have them assayed."

The German pounced upon the lumps with an ejaculation of surprise and delight; and well he might do so, as his educated eye told him at once that they were remarkably rich and valuable specimens of ore.

He turned them over, held them up to the light, and inspected them closely, and fairly gloated over them.

"I can give a good enough guess at the value of these without taking them to Denver," said he. "Where did you get them? Where did they come from?"

"The hole in the ground."

Carl Klein dropped upon a seat and stared at the speaker as if his eyes would burst his glasses.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed.

"I know it is impossible; but it is a fact, all the same. I told you that I was going to make a little blast to-day, and I have made it, and that is what it opened up. My little blast was the lancet that tapped the vein."

"Wonderful! Who could have expected it?"

"Nobody, of course; but I had a faint hope, and went to work on the hope. Shall I help you unpack your traps, Carl?"

"Why so? I have nothing to do with your discovery. You are now the owner of my share in the hole in the ground."

"Not much. That don't go, partner. I told you that I couldn't accept your offer before night, hoping that something would happen to keep you; and now it has happened, and you have got to stay and help me get out what there is in the hole in the ground."

"Exton, your faith and perseverance make me ashamed of myself."

"Betta stay togedda," remarked Lemon Squeezer.

And they did stay.

CHAPTER IV.

"WE ARE ALL LIABLE."

THE chief visible peculiarity of the Small Hopes Ranch was the extreme neatness of the house and its surroundings.

Such neatness was quite uncommon in that region of hard work and hurry, where the people were too busy or too careless to polish, prune, and keep their establishments nice and in order.

The appearance of the place, too, did not indicate a high degree of prosperity, as the energies of the occupants seemed to be expended rather upon the vines and flowers on and about the house, than upon the profitable carrying on of the business of the ranch.

As for the house, that was a cheap affair, built of rough boards, battened and whitewashed; but it was peculiar in being built with an L, so that it occupied two sides of a small square.

It had been so erected by its builder and the owner of the ranch, Tom Halsey, with the view of establishing there a house of call or tavern in a small way; but the scheme had fallen through for the simple reason that a new and more direct road to Oro Fino had been opened, and travel ceased to take that direction.

After that disaster there was little ranching done at Small Hopes, and yet the family seemed always to have plenty of money and to lack for nothing.

Tom Halsey was given to frequent and occasionally long absences, and was in the habit, when the question of business was brought up, of speaking of himself as a speculator, though nobody appeared to know what his speculations were, or where or when or how they were made.

At last the people of the Oro Fino district became suspicious of his speculations—more than suspicious, indeed, as cattle stealing had become a great nuisance in the region, and there seemed to be good reason for connecting Tom Halsey's speculating with enterprises of that bad character.

A Vigilance Committee was formed by the cattle-men, and one result of their labors was the violent and ignominious end of Tom Halsey, as mentioned in the family circle of the Jonases.

Great was the consternation, and deep was the trouble at Small Hopes Ranch when this sad news was brought to Tom Halsey's afflicted family.

It was conveyed to them by one of the Vigilantes, who did his best to break it to them gently, expressing the idea figuratively at first, and gradually letting the terrible fact dawn upon them that the head of the family was then dangling from a tree at the distance of perhaps a dozen miles from the ranch, as dead as an Egyptian mummy.

He kindly gave them directions for finding the body, and Tom Halsey's daughter Victoria, with her brother Jack and Dave Wisner, who held the nominal position of foreman of the ranch, went out with a team, and brought Tom Halsey home and buried him without the intervention of a coroner or a death certificate.

There was no gathering of the neighbors at that funeral, no sermon, no ceremony, no flowers; but many tears were shed, and some vows of vengeance were registered that night to be heard from in the future.

The mother of the family, never a strong woman physically, though considerably above the average in acuteness of intellect and strength of character, was for a considerable time completely prostrated by the shock of her husband's death.

When she was at her worst, and not expected to "pull through," the burden of her wail was that it was her fault, that her husband would have been living yet if she had let him alone.

Her children did not then know what she meant by such expressions; but the time came when they understood her.

The death of a father under any circumstances is a great trial; but when that father has been

condemned to death under the law, or by the practically unanimous voice of his fellow-citizens, and has perished ignominiously, there is a feeling connected with his sudden demise that surpasses sorrow—indeed, there is a legacy of desolation.

Victoria Halsey and her brother Jack had that legacy, and they were by no means disposed to kiss the rod that had smitten them.

They were anxious—especially Vic—to understand the matter plainly and thoroughly, and to know just why and how their father had perished, and for that information they applied to Dave Wisner, who had been Tom Halsey's particular confidant, and who was supposed to know everything that went on everywhere.

"Why, you know how he died," answered Dave, when the girl shot a straight question at him. "He is dead now, and can't be brought back, and what's the use of crying over spilt milk or scraping an old sore?"

"But I want to know just why they killed him."

"Because they accused him of stealing cattle."

"And now everybody will despise mother and Jack and me, and will hate us, because father was hung for a cattle-thief."

"Not so bad as that, Miss Vic. It ain't such a terrible thing. We are all liable, you know, as the nigger said when he stole the overcoat."

"All liable to steal cattle?"

"I don't mean that, though a good many of us are—more than you'd be apt to think, I reckon. I mean that we are all liable to be picked up and strung up, without law or reason. I have known of at least a dozen men about here who have been hung or shot for horse or cattle thieving, and I would be willing to bet high that not more than half of them were guilty. Lynching is a good scheme sometimes, when there's a sure thing and the law can't be depended on; but as a steady business it don't work well."

There was some consolation in this; but it was not satisfactory to Vic Halsey, into whose heart the sting had entered deeply.

"I want to know," said she, "who those men were who killed father, and so does Jack. We want you to find out and give us their names."

Dave Wisner made it a business to learn the names of the lynchers, and he did learn them, or most of them, and he told them to Victoria, who put them on paper and memorized them.

Such was a portion of the sad history of the family at Small Hopes Ranch.

There seemed to be no sadness, however, about Victoria Halsey, as she sat, one bright morning, at a window that was shaded by climbing vines.

Very bright and ladylike, and almost handsome she looked as she sat there with her head bent over her sewing—a picture of tranquil domestic industry.

Quite handsome some would have called her when she raised her large brown eyes and smilingly greeted her mother as she entered the room.

Mrs. Halsey had the appearance of a woman who was old before her time. Her hair was gray, "but not with years," and her worn face and fragile form spoke of an inward sorrow; but her eyes were feverishly bright, and there was a resolute hardness in the nervous compression of her thin lips.

"What is it, ma?" eagerly asked Victoria. "I saw you stop a man who was riding by and speak to him, and you look as if you had got some news."

"Bad news from the Jonas place," answered Mrs. Halsey. "It is true that a man from there was killed the other night—one of a party that were chasing some cattle-thieves; but it was not the old wretch or either of his sons—nobody but an Irishman named Flaherty."

"That is too bad. I was hoping that it might have been that sneak, Herman Jonas, who is the apple of the old Jew's eye, but there's no such luck. When a shot is fired into a bunch in the dark, there is no telling who will be hit."

"Herman Jonas will be likely to get his dose in time, my dear. As for the younger one, all he needs is to be let alone and he will settle his own case."

"Well, we can wait, I suppose; but it is really too bad that things should turn out so meanly when one does one's best. It seems to me, ma, that Jack gets all the luck. He has had it all so far, anyhow."

"Jack has good chances. He goes out among people more than you do, and sees more of them, and learns how to take them. He is uncommonly smart and careful, too, for a boy of his years."

"Careful? I should say careful. He knows how to get the law on his side, or, at least, to put himself in the right. Think how neatly he got away with that big brute, Cephas Strang, one of the worst of the wretches who murdered his father. Strang was roaring drunk, and Jack picked a quarrel with him without seeming to do so, and when the blind fool tried to wipe him out, Jack pulled on him once, and once was enough. How I envied him for that! I would be satisfied if I could square accounts with Simon Jonas; but I have tried hard, and found no opening for that."

The business-like style in which those two wo-

men, mother and daughter, spoke of the killing of men was actually chilling to the blood; but the truth was that they had so long brooded over one thought, accustomed themselves to one idea, and trained themselves to one purpose, that their natures had become warped.

"Your chance will come yet, my dear," said Mrs. Halsey, in the same matter-of-fact tone.

"And even I, old and useless as I am—my chance may come. By the way, Vic, that was Bill Wheatleigh who passed here, and he tells me that Simon Jonas is going to hire a detective to hunt and catch the thieves who have been running off his cattle."

Victoria laughed, and her laugh was low and musical, though there was a metallic ring in it that gave it a certain harshness of tone.

"I wish him joy of his job," said she. "If the men about here are not smart enough to find out what becomes of their cattle, no outsider will be likely to find it out for them."

"It will go hard with the old wretch to have to pay for such help. Here is somebody riding up to the house. I hope that it is not a detective."

"No, indeed," said Victoria, as she parted the vines and looked out. "That is Mr. Exton, and he is dressed as if he has come courting."

Horace Exton was wearing the neat business suit which he had reserved for special occasions, presenting quite a gentlemanly appearance, and he looked bright and happy as he entered the house.

Mrs. Halsey, who was not given to entertaining company, said a few words to him, and went out, leaving him with Victoria, who invited him to take a seat, and greeted him like an old friend.

"I am glad to see you looking so well," said she. "How is luck with you? What is the news from the hole in the ground?"

"It is still there," he answered, pleasantly. "Nobody has been bold enough yet to come along and carry it off."

"That would be a very stupid thing for anybody to do, if all that I hear about the hole is true."

Exton was so accustomed to being joked about that unprofitable hole in the ground that he was never fretted by anything that was said concerning it.

"I have no doubt that you have heard the truth so far," said he. "That hole in the ground is the laughing-stock of the Oro Fino district, and I suppose it has deserved its bad reputation. I came near having a very serious loss there yesterday."

"How was that?"

"My partner, who has been disgusted with the business for quite a while, finally gave up yesterday, packed his gripsack, and said that he was going to Denver. I told him that I would put in one more day at work in the hole, and went in there with Lemon Squeezer. Then he stayed."

"Why did he stay?"

"It happened that I struck it rich just then, and I could not allow him to go."

"Struck it rich. Mr. Exton? Really?"

"Really and truly, and very rich. I made a blast, and struck the vein at last, and that's a very good rhyme. I never saw anything richer anywhere. It is just wonderful. The hole in the ground has redeemed itself."

"Better say that you have redeemed it by sticking to it. You have lots of pluck."

"Yes, I have shown plenty of pluck—unless it ought to be called obstinacy—and now I have the luck, and I am glad of it."

"Of course it would have been very hard to go away and acknowledge that you had made a waste of all that time and labor."

"Oh, I would not have left here in any event. If Klein had gone to Denver, and the hole in the ground had been an utter failure, I would have stuck to it."

"Why so?"

"Because I wanted to be near you."

The girl must have expected something like this, as it could not be for nothing that Exton had come there to tell her of his good fortune.

"It would not do you or anybody else any good to be near me," she calmly replied.

"It would be all the good in the world to me, because I love you, Victoria, and I have come here this morning to ask you to marry me. I would not have dared to say as much awhile ago, when I had sunk my last dollar in that hole in the ground, and there seemed to be no prospect of ever getting any of it back; but I am likely to become a rich man now, and I feel I have a right to ask you to marry me."

The girl's countenance changed. Her eyes were cast down, and a sudden flush was succeeded by intense pallor.

"Take it back, Mr. Exton!" she pleaded. "You will have to take it back. I can never marry, and I am the last person that you ought to think of marrying."

"Why do you say that?"

"Can you ask me why? Surely you know well enough. One reason is—and no other reason is needed—that my father was hung for cattle-stealing."

"But you have not been hung for cattle-stealing."

"Not yet."

"And you are no cattle-thief."

"How do you know? You must not be too sure of that. As Dave Wisner has told me, we are all liable to be accused of something of the sort, whether we are guilty or not."

"I must beg you not to joke about this matter, Victoria, as I am thoroughly in earnest."

"And I am sorry to see that you are so much in earnest, as I am compelled to say that it must stop right here. If we are to continue to be friends, as I hope we may, you must not speak to me in that way again."

"Your wish is law to me, and I will wait. I won't bother you any more, Victoria, but you may be sure that I don't mean to give you up. And now, as we are the best of friends, I hope you will let me give you a bit of advice, as a brother might advise a sister."

"I will thank you for it."

"I am afraid that you go roaming about the country too much alone and at night. In fact, I have seen you riding alone and at night when you were far from home."

"What harm is there in that?"

"It is dangerous, my dear."

"Not for me. You are not thoroughly acquainted with me yet. Do you know how I can ride?"

"You are a splendid rider. I never saw a better."

"Do you know how I can shoot?"

"I don't know anything about that."

"Some day I will show you, and then you will admit that you seldom saw a better shot."

"But you don't want to shoot anybody, I hope."

"I might want to. We are all liable, as Dave Wisner says. I assure you, Mr. Exton, that I am well able to take care of myself. I am always careful, too; but, as your advice is well meant, I will try to be yet more careful."

CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER OF THEM.

Oro Fino was ablaze, not with the light of a conflagration, but with the usual "strictly business" illumination that made it so resplendent and attractive at night to its residents and the scattered population of the surrounding country.

Since the railroad had reached that point the town had got an amazing growth, and had sprung up like a mushroom.

Originally the center of a small mining district, the mining interests had not proved as profitable as had been expected, and Oro Fino had experienced a season of depression, from which it had been partially relieved by the extension of the ranching industry.

Then the railroad had come, and Oro Fino rejoiced in a "boom."

With the boom had come bigger and more showy saloons, finer gambling establishments, a music hall that was styled an opera house, with other accessories that were alike expensive and demoralizing, all of which were vastly attractive to cattle-men and cowboys and others.

Nick Markell's place was not only the showiest saloon in Oro Fino, but combined the advantages of a bar-room, a small variety theater and a big gambling room, all of which were entered by way of the bar-room.

On the night which has been mentioned, or should have been, the games up-stairs were running, though not yet briskly, the variety performance had fairly begun, the space on the main floor was rapidly filling up with a motley collection of humanity, and the bar was doing a rushing business.

Among those who hung about the bar was a neatly dressed young man, almost beardless, but who evidently considered himself as much of a man as any person in the establishment.

There was no bluster or swagger about him; but he spoke and acted with a quiet sort of assumption, as if he wanted it to be understood that he was standing on his dignity, and nobody would be allowed to tread on his toes.

Though he had patronized the bar pretty freely, he did not seem to be at all affected by the liquor he had drunk, as his face was not flushed, and he kept glancing warily about, after the manner of a person who knew what he was doing, and meant to look out for Number One.

Yet he had hoisted in enough of the fiery fluid to heat his blood and to make him touchy, if not quarrelsome, and this fact was made evident when he had an altercation with the barkeeper about his change.

The point being settled to his satisfaction he expressed his opinion of the transaction in a very forcible manner, and the barkeeper answered him quite as hotly and in yet stronger language.

It seemed likely that the difficulty would lead to something more violent and dangerous than words, and the bystanders had begun to move about to give the disputants room, when a person who was recognized as having authority there stepped in to quell the disturbance.

This person was no other than Nick Markell, the proprietor of the establishment.

He was a tall and large middle-aged man, of powerful build, with a heavy grizzled beard,

and a countenance that was anything but prepossessing.

If he did not own the earth, one would have thought that he wanted to rule as much of it as came within his reach.

Though he stepped in for the purpose of quelling the disturbance, he did not proceed with the least pretense of impartiality, but took the barkeeper's part at once, and sat down on his antagonist quite severely.

He towered over the belligerent young customer, speaking to him in an abrupt and supercilious style that was surely not intended to conciliate.

"Look here, Jack Halsey; you are too durned fresh about here."

"I am just fresh enough to suit myself," answered the youth, "and it won't be safe for any man to try to salt me down."

"It won't, hey? I reckon it would be an easy enough job to do, if anybody cared to do it. I say that you had better not make yourself so durned fresh, considering who and what you are."

"Who and what am I, then?"

"The son of a man who was hanged for cattle-stealing, as everybody knows."

"He was murdered, and nobody ought to know that better than you, who were one of his murderers!"

It seemed to the bystanders that this talk was becoming decidedly warlike, more so than the previous altercation with the barkeeper.

The warlike aspect was visible not so much in the words that had passed so far, as in the style in which they were spoken, and the evident animus of the opponents.

One of the parties appeared to be eager to provoke a deadly controversy, and the other was surely willing to meet him at least half-way.

That there was bad blood between them was a fact well known in Oro Fino; but what chance had the slight youth against the big and powerful man?

Just the chance that the "resources of civilization" give to the weakest of those who have the skill and courage to use them.

"You talk like a fool from Sillyville!" sneered Nick Markell. "He was hanged for cattle-stealing, and I know that he deserved hanging!"

At this there were mutterings and grumblings of protest, as it was naturally the opinion of any fair-minded crowd that a father's faults or crimes ought not to be "thrown up" to his son.

Above all other sounds rose the voice of Jack Halsey, clear and shrill and wickedly emphatic.

"You are a liar!"

This was the deadliest of insults. In Oro Fino, just as in other towns, men would lie and cheat and even steal, and their offenses would pass without special notice; but it was a matter of common consent that when one man called another a liar, blood was the only satisfaction for the insult.

The spectators expected the big man to fall upon the other and crush him, or, at least, to knock him down and walk over him; but Markell made no such demonstration.

His red face turned livid in hue as he reached for his revolver.

Jack Halsey, who had doubtless been anticipating such a movement, was quicker than his antagonist in drawing his pistol, but was in no hurry to use it.

He waited until Markell's intention was apparent—until his finger was on the trigger—and then he fired.

The big man staggered as if the force of the explosion had blown him backward, and dropped in a heap on the floor, his right hand jerking up as he fell, and discharging his pistol at the ceiling.

So quickly was this catastrophe reached, that scarcely more than two seconds elapsed between the insult and the shot; but the course of action did not escape the experienced eyes of the spectators, and the movements of the antagonists were noted and accurately timed by more than one.

This must have been calculated on by the young man, who was much cooler than he seemed to be, and who had clearly put himself in the attitude of defending his life against a deadly aggression.

Nick Markell struggled to get up, and succeeded in partially rising, supporting himself on his left arm.

Though the pallor of death had already settled in his countenance, the desire for vengeance was so strong in him that he cocked his revolver with his right hand, and leveled it at his young antagonist, who stood there with his arms folded, calmly gazing at his work.

"Don't let him go!" hoarsely murmured Markell. "Give me a chance at him!"

He had his chance, but could not use it.

The pistol fell from his stiffened fingers, and he rolled over, silent and motionless, as dead as Jack Halsey's father, who had been hung for cattle-stealing.

"Another of them," muttered the young man in an undertone, as he walked away unmolested and left the saloon.

Out on the street, at a little distance from Nick Markell's place, he was met by a young woman who had been looking or waiting for him—his sister, Victoria Halsey.

She had not only heard the shot, and had seen Jack come out of the saloon; but she perceived immediately, from the expression of his face, that something unusual had happened, and it was easy for her to put the three points together.

"What is it, Jack?" she eagerly demanded.

"What have you been doing?"

"I have killed Nick Markell."

Her big brown eyes fairly burned as she smiled cruelly.

"You have the luck of it, Jack. You struck high and hard this time. Come, let us go home. That is glory enough for one day."

CHAPTER VI.

SMART ALECK.

It happened, however, that Victoria Halsey and Jack were not going to get away from Oro Fino that night quite as soon or as easily as they expected to.

The sudden death of Nick Markell had produced somewhat of a stunning effect in the crowded saloon; but the effect was only temporary, and the dead man's friends quickly began to blaze up and insist upon doing something.

He had plenty of friends, to say nothing of the rustlers and heelers who depended on him for free drinks, and who were consequently ready to do his work, dirty and otherwise.

He also had a son, Dan Markell, about the same age as Jack Halsey, who was not present when the shot was fired, but appeared there directly after his father's death, and immediately became clamorous for the execution of justice in the shape of vengeance upon the slayer.

It was easy for him to collect for that purpose a party of Nick Markell's friends and supporters, who followed him out into the street, making more noise than was necessary, or perhaps advisable,

Among those who went with them or followed them were several who had seen the shooting, and who were therefore inclined to watch the proceedings further and see that the young man had fair play.

Jack and Victoria Halsey, as they were walking slowly toward the place where their horses were hitched, heard the noise of the party issuing from the saloon, and, naturally suspecting that it concerned them, turned to see what it was about.

"Kill him!" shouted Dan Markell, as he rode toward the pair and fired his pistol wildly.

"Kill the scoundrel who murdered my father!"

"Hold on there," answered the clear and ringing voice of Victoria Halsey. "There are two of us here, and we know how to take care of ourselves."

"Kill him!" again shouted Dan Markell. "Kill the son of a cattle-thief!"

As the Halseys stood and faced their enemies with cocked revolvers, two men hastily stepped forward and stood between them and their enemies, and the two men were recognized as Horace Exton and Carl Klein.

"Here are two more," said Exton in a tone that was plainly heard by all concerned. "We saw the shooting, and we know that the lad was defending his life, and we mean to stand by him. Nick Markell was the first to pull a pistol."

"That's so," observed another man, as he stepped forward and ranged himself at the side of the miners, and another followed him.

"He called my father a liar," yelled Dan Markell.

"Your father bullied him and insulted him first," replied Exton, "and the lad had a right to take his own part."

"Stand out of the way, there!" ordered one of the Markell party. "We've got nothing against you folks, and don't want to hurt you; so you'd better not mix up in what don't concern you."

"Fair play concerns us, and we mean to stand up for it."

"We mean to have that young scamp and git satisfaction out of him. Stand out of the way, or you'll have to take the consequences."

"Stand out of the way, all of you, and keep the peace, or I'll show you what the consequences will be!"

This speaker was a person in authority, who had both the power and the will to enforce his orders.

He was Harvey Hobbs, Marshal of Oro Fino, a tall, broad-shouldered, big-chested man, whose great physical strength was notorious, and whose courage no person had ever thought of questioning.

The two big revolvers which he wore conspicuously on his person were at once his insignia of office and his special deputies; but his personal character was a better "persuader" than a battery of artillery.

With him came forward a man who was a comparative stranger in Oro Fino, though evidently a friend of the marshal's.

They stepped in between the opposing parties with the avowed intention of keeping the peace, but stood with their backs to Jack Halsey and his friends, while they faced the Markell crowd.

"Do you hear me?" Hobbs demanded. "I am the preserver of the peace in this town, and you can't have a skirmish on the street while I am here, and attending to business."

"You don't understand this matter, major," protested one of the Markell party. "Jack Halsey, there, has murdered Nick Markell, shot him down in his own house."

"I know all about it," replied the marshal. "I didn't see the fuss, but my friend, Aleck Sander, was there, and he tells me that the young fellow acted in self-defense. That is not a point for him or me to decide—nor for you, either—but I don't mean to allow the lad to be shot down, dry so, in this street. Not this night. If you believe that he has bucked against the law, get out a warrant for him, and he shall come and answer it if I am big enough to bring him. Are you going to simmer down, now, or shall I have to read the riot act to you?"

No doubt the Markell party were extremely loth to abandon their expected prey; but the attitude of Major Hobbs had taken the spunk out of them, and they made no further warlike demonstration.

The marshal turned to Jack Halsey, whom he advised to go home at once, and to keep away from Oro Fino, unless he should be sent for.

Jack and his sister walked to their horses, followed by Horace Exton.

"We are greatly obliged to you, Mr. Exton, for your timely help," said Victoria as that gentleman assisted her to mount.

"You are quite welcome. I always like to see fair play. By the way, Jack, I hope you are not going to keep up the business of killing people. Remember that the pitcher that goes often to the well is sure to get broken at last."

"I am safe so far," answered Jack, with a smile. "Thanks for your advice, Mr. Exton, and I will try to take care of myself."

The crowd in the street gradually dispersed, and Dan Markell led his partisans back to the saloon, to moisten their throats as they discussed their grievances and cared for the body of the dead proprietor.

Horace Exton and his partner rode off together toward their hole in the ground.

"You will get yourself into a scrape about that girl yet," observed Klein.

"Fair play is a jewel," sententiously answered the Englishman.

"And she is a bright jewel, I suppose you think."

"She is bright enough, anyhow."

Major Hobbs and the friend whom he had mentioned as Aleck Sander walked up the street a little distance, and stepped into a saloon—not that which had been lately presided over by Nick Markell, but a smaller and less conspicuous one—where they seated themselves in a quiet corner and called for cigars.

Aleck Sander did not seem to be as tall when he was seated as when he was standing, being one of the long-legged breed, and he was yet a young man, probably a year or two under forty.

He had dark hair and complexion, was neatly dressed, was passably good-looking, wore a large felt hat which was usually drawn down over his brows, and had the appearance of a steady man of business, say a bank cashier in a thriving town.

"It seems to me, Aleck," remarked Major Hobbs, "that you are everywhere and see everything, and nothing escapes you. It is no wonder that they name you Smart Aleck. For my part, I think I shall have to call you Aleck Sander the Great."

"It would not be the first time that I have struck that nickname," answered the other. "Folks are fond of joking about my name. But it was no wonder that I was at that scene, Harvey. I happened in there as a good many other people did, and when the fuss began I watched it closely, because I was interested in that young man."

"You were? What sort of an interest?"

"It seemed to me that there must be a story mixed up in that business—a story that runs backward and is likely to run forward—and that I had got in somewhere about the middle of it. So I wanted to know the first part and guess at the ending, unless I may get a chance to read the whole."

"What did you catch onto, Smart Aleck?"

"It was clear that there was a grudge between those two. The big one told the little one that his father had been hung for cattle-stealing."

"It was a mean trick, Aleck, to throw that up to the young fellow."

"Of course it was, especially if it was true, and the big fellow said it in a sneering, brutal way which showed that he meant to rub it in all he could. The young fellow spoke up as sharp as you please, and said that his father had been murdered, and that the big one was one of the murderers."

"That was business talk," observed the marshal.

"Strictly business, and so was the rest of it. Then I watched the young one so closely that I could read him like a book, or thought I could. I saw that he was itching for a chance to get his work in, and that he was as cool as an icicle and as hard as quartz, though he

seemed to be carrying the thing off like a hot-blooded fool. When he gave the big one the lie, I was quite sure that he was playing his game as fine as silk."

"What sort of a game did you take it to be?"

"Well, major, if he wanted to kill Nick Markell, and to have the law on his side, and to make a pretty clear showing of acting in self-defense, he succeeded admirably, and I envy his pluck and coolness."

The marshal rubbed his stubby beard, and bent his heavy brows, as if this statement had given him food for thought.

"I don't know but you are right about that, Aleck," said he. "This is the second time that Jack Halsey has killed a man in pretty much the same way. It isn't three months since he had a quarrel with Cephas Strang, and he provoked Strang, who was drunk, to pull a pistol on him, and shot him just as he shot Markell. As you say, he had the law on his side."

"Was Strang one of the murderers, too?"

"I suppose the young chap would have said so."

"Was Markell his second man, then?"

"His second."

"And Halsey is so young."

"Hardly more than twenty-one, I should say."

"I suppose it is a fact, major, that his father was hung for cattle-stealing?"

"Yes, he was hung by Vigilantes; but that happened four or five years ago, before my time, and I don't pretend to know the rights of the matter. Young Halsey says that it was a murder; but I never looked into it at all carefully, as it was outside of my jurisdiction."

"The sequel to the story seems likely to come within your jurisdiction, major. If this sort of thing goes on, you may have to take a hand in the game."

"If this is really what you may call a vendetta, Aleck, and if Jack Halsey really means to kill all the men who took part in the hanging of his father, he has a long job before him, as well as a tough one. But I hope he may draw the line somewhere—say at Nick Markell."

"He seems to be a dangerous young man to be going around loose, and he may be expected to come to a violent end. There was another point in the business, Harvey, that interested me."

"What was that?"

"The woman in the case, of course. I have made a guess about her; but there is no use in guessing when you can easily tell me who and what she is."

"You mean the girl who met him and stood up with him there against the crowd. That is his sister, Victoria Halsey. She is a trump card, as you could well see, as bright as a new dollar and as gritty as brook sand. That is about all I know of her, except that she is something wonderful as a rider, and I am told that few men can shoot straighter or quicker than she can, either with a pistol or a rifle."

"There is a pair of them, then. Now, major, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if their father was really guilty of cattle-stealing, and it is just possible that there may be a vein of cattle-stealing running through the family."

"I don't know anything about that. Cattle-stealing is out of my jurisdiction. It is as much as I can do to keep anything like order in this little town of Oro Fino, and sometimes I am very sick of the job. Come, Aleck, it is getting late, and I must be up bright and early in the morning. Let us go and turn in."

But Aleck Sander had some other matters to look after, as well as some points to turn over in his mind, and he bade his friend good-night.

The subject which he pondered, and which stuck to him like a burr, was connected with Jack Halsey's shooting scrape, and led up from that to "the woman in the case."

"There is a pair of them," was his muttered conclusion, "and there is a vein of cattle-stealing running through the family, as well as a vein of vengeance. They are capable of anything that will help them or harm those they hate. The cattle-thieves who are working this circuit are said to be two, and one of them is a woman. Decidedly I must keep my eye on the pair."

CHAPTER VII.

"HE IS A DETECTIVE."

THE funeral of Nick Markell was a great occasion in Oro Fino—not exactly a celebration, as few people, if any, were really rejoiced at the sudden taking off of the deceased—but something in the nature of a picnic, and a big boom for the saloons and some other accessories of civilization.

Nick Markell had been one of the magnates of the camp—not highly respected, but a solid man in a moneyed way, and possessing power and influence that had gained him plenty of followers, if not plenty of friends.

There had been a coroner's inquest after his violent death, the coroner being a new institution in Oro Fino, and one which, because of its novelty, the citizens were disposed to "work for all it was worth."

In this case it was not worth much—at least,

such was the opinion of the friends and partisans of the dead man.

They made strenuous efforts to induce the coroner's jury to frame a verdict condemnatory of Jack Halsey, but found themselves harassed and shut off at every turn, and this without the least effort on the part of him who may be styled the accused.

Among the witnesses of the encounter who were willing to give their testimony were several reliable men, experienced in the difficulties of that nature, whose statements were decidedly favorable to young Halsey.

They made it plain that the controversy had been provoked by Nick Markell, who had not only given the first insult, but had made the first aggressive movement.

As the question was which of them had "pulled" first, and as it was made clear that Jack Halsey would have been shot down if he had not chanced to be a trifle quicker than his antagonist, the verdict exonerated him from blame.

This, of course, did not settle the matter for Dan Markell and his faction, who nursed their grudge against the slayer, and endeavored to make Nick Markell's funeral a big affair, with the view of gaining popularity for their cause.

Among those who did not attend the funeral was Aleck Sander, nor did he spend the day in Oro Fino.

He mounted a good horse and rode out to the Small Hopes Ranch, arriving there a little before noon.

His arrival there was productive of no little wonderment to Jack and Victoria, as well as a good deal of consternation in the mind of their mother, who was averse to receiving visits from strangers.

Smart Aleck, however, had a good supply of both tact and cheek, and explained his visit quite naturally, if not to the entire satisfaction of all concerned.

"I witnessed that difficulty of yours, Mr. Halsey, in the Oro Fino the other night," said he—"perhaps you noticed me there with Major Hobbs—and, as I believe that you were in the right of that, I thought I had better ride out here this morning, to give you some information, together with a little friendly advice."

"We were thankful to you for the interest you took in us at that time," observed Victoria, "and we will now be glad to get any information you may choose to give us."

"My name is Sander, Miss Halsey, and I may say that I have continued to take an interest in that affair. I admired your brother's pluck and coolness, and your conduct in standing up for him was more than admirable. With the help of my friend, Major Hobbs, I have exerted a little influence in getting the matter straightened up. My information is that the coroner's jury has cleared your brother, and he is not likely to be troubled by the law."

"We were already aware of that, Mr. Sander. Our friend, Dave Wisner, was in Oro Fino watching the proceedings, and he brought us that information."

"Glad to know that you had got it. I suppose he told you that Markell's friends are greatly excited over the matter, and are talking very savagely about your brother."

"We had expected that, and we are not afraid of them, as we believe that we are able to take pretty good care of ourselves."

"It is always best to be on the safe side, though, and I wanted to advise your brother, as Nick Markell's funeral is going to make a big stir, to stay at home to-day, or at least to keep away from Oro Fino."

"That is just what he meant to do, Mr. Sander. He is not fond of funerals since his father was buried, and it will probably be some time before he visits Oro Fino again."

"If I had known all that, I might have saved myself the journey out here. But I meant well, and thought that I might do you a friendly turn."

"We thank you for your good intentions, at least."

"By the way, Miss Halsey, as you have mentioned your father's death, I hope I may be excused for alluding to the subject, though I am aware that it is a delicate one."

"Not to us, Mr. Sander, though it may be more than delicate to the men who murdered him. The truth will never come out, perhaps; but, if it should, I am sure that we need not be ashamed of it."

"Is not that a point that is worth making?" inquired Sander. "As the truth does not seem inclined to come out of its own accord, might it not be possible to bring it out? If so, it might save your brother considerable trouble, and at the same time be useful to the rest of the family."

"The murderers," answered Victoria, "are interested in concealing their crime, or putting it in a false light, and that happened so long ago."

"Only four or five years. That is a long time in such a country as this, but not too long to shut out the discovery of the truth, if the proper measures were taken. I have talked of this matter with Major Hobbs. He says that it happened before his time, and he has never looked into it carefully; but he has his doubts.

If I could know all there is to be learned about it, perhaps I might be of some service to you."

"Are you a detective?" inquired Victoria.

"I have done some work in that line."

"We are not able to employ a detective, Mr. Sander."

"Don't let that worry you. I was not proposing to do it as a business job. I have taken such an interest in the matter, that I will be only too glad if I can be of any service to you, and the service shall cost you nothing."

Perhaps Victoria thought that this new and eager friend would be entirely too glad to enter her service as he proposed, and that it would not be advisable for her to encourage him too extensively.

As dinner was ready just then, she parried his offer by inviting him to stay and eat with the family.

The invitation was quite a matter of course, and he accepted it as a matter of course.

Mrs. Halsey was inclined to treat the stranger with frigid politeness, but warmed to him at once when he praised the cool and plucky conduct of her children at Oro Fino.

After dinner he got her cornered, and was getting on with her remarkably well, when Victoria put in a word that informed her that he was a detective, and after that she became an iceberg.

Jack was also more or less fascinated with him, though inclined to be suspicious, and willingly showed him about the place when he evinced a disposition to linger.

In a grass lot near the house were two horses, a bay gelding and a black mare, in which Sander took a lively interest, expressing a great admiration of both.

"That black mare is your sister's, I suppose," he remarked.

"Yes," answered Jack; "she is Vic's pet."

"I was sure that I had seen her in Oro Fino, when you and your sister rode away from there. She is a splendid animal, and I would like to own her."

When he at last started to leave the place, Victoria followed him out to his horse, and spoke to him more freely and warmly than in the house.

"I have not thanked you as you deserve to be thanked," said she, "for your kind offer. I do not know whether I shall be able to avail myself of it or not; that will depend on circumstances. You have perhaps noticed that my mother is peculiar, and my brother is suspicious of everybody. Therefore I must be careful what I say and do. But you may be sure your kindness is appreciated."

"You will consider my offer, then?" he suggested.

"Assuredly I will; but I must see you alone some time and apart from my family. Then I can talk to you as I choose to talk."

"Nothing would please me better," eagerly answered Sander. "But when and where can I meet you?"

"Leave me alone to manage that."

When Smart Aleck rode away from the Small Hopes Ranch he had become a little further advanced in his conclusions.

"One man and one woman," he muttered. "A bay horse and a black mare. It really does look as if there might be a vein of cattle-stealing running through that family. What a splendid creature the girl is! I should hate mightily to do anything that would set her against me. But what must be must be."

Victoria was taken to task by her mother for her affability toward the stranger.

"What were you saying to him?" demanded Mrs. Halsey.

"Just giving him a little taffy, ma. It is well to have two strings to a bow, and I may use him for one."

"I am sure that he came here for no good purpose, and you had better not fool with him."

"I have no fear of him. If he can get ahead of me, he is smarter than I think he is."

"Remember that he is a detective."

"That is just what I intend to remember."

CHAPTER VIII.

OVER THE CLIFF.

ALECK SANDER did not see Victoria Halsey the next day, nor did he get any word from her.

He wondered when and how she would arrange the meeting that she had promised him, and discovered that he was more anxious for such a meeting than he could have imagined he would be.

"I must be careful," he said to himself, "or I may fall in love with her, and that would never do."

He waited about Oro Fino, as if he expected a message from her, until afternoon, and then rode out to the Jonas Ranch, where he was warmly welcomed by Simon Jonas.

This welcome he appreciated at its true value, as he knew that the Jew, who was paying for the services of a detective, was anxious to be sure that he was getting the worth of his money.

Simon Jonas at once wanted to know the news in Oro Fino, especially with regard to the events following the death of Nick Markell, and

whether any steps had been taken to punish the young man who had killed him.

"Nothing has been done yet," answered Sander, "and I doubt if anybody will attempt to do anything legally. I have no doubt that the young fellow meant to kill Nick Markell if he could get a chance at him; but he was careful to keep the law on his side, and what can be done?"

"I sometimes think," observed Simon Jonas, "that there is getting to be a little too much law in this country—the kind of law that aids the escape of criminals, instead of securing their punishment."

"That wasn't the sort of law that prevailed when Tom Halsey was hung."

"Indeed it wasn't. We got away with him in short order."

"And now his son seems to be getting away with you in short order."

"He is a murderous young scoundrel, and I suppose that we shall have to form a Vigilance Committee to settle his case, if it is a fact that the law can't touch him. Do you really believe that he means to try to kill off the Vigilantes who hung Tom Halsey?"

"It looks very much, Mr. Jonas, as if that is his intention. You know that he charged Cephas Strang and Nick Markell with having been his father's murderers."

"Then he may be expected to get after me, and it is a wonder that he has let me off so long, as I am really the chief of the Vigilantes."

"Perhaps he has not been able to get a fair chance at you."

"I hope he never will; but I must be careful of myself, if such a wild beast as that is allowed to go about the country killing people."

"It seems to me, Mr. Jonas, that you have been taking good care of yourself, or he might have had a chance at you before now."

Smart Aleck spoke lightly of this matter; but it was evident that it was no sort of a joke to Simon Jonas, who had turned quite pale, and was fidgeting uneasily in his chair.

"If it really seems to you to be a serious business," observed Sander, "the best thing for you to do will be to stay at home and keep out of danger. Nobody is likely to try to molest you in your own house in the daytime, and at night I expect to be hanging around the ranch to watch for those cattle-thieves. That is what brought me here this evening."

"Do you expect to watch these thieves alone?" inquired Jonas.

"Yes, I don't need any help; that is to say, I don't want anybody to bother me. I can always do my work more surely and more safely alone."

"But you might find them."

"That is what I am here for."

"If you should catch a gang in the act of running off a bunch of cattle, would you chase them?"

"Of course I would."

"Why, Mr. Sander, you could never catch them and take them in if you were alone?"

"I might do something that would serve as good a purpose, though."

"They shoot, you know. They killed Flaherty."

"I am not afraid of their shooting."

"Would you shoot them down as they ran?"

"No. I never like to spoil a good subject for the rope or anything in that line! Just let me alone to manage that business, Mr. Jonas, and I must ask you to let me manage it in my own way."

"All right. I wish you luck."

Aleck Sander did watch that night, and his style of watching was most thorough and effective.

Concealing his horse where it would be the most handy for him in any event which he might expect to transpire, he kept guard over a cattle corral at a considerable distance from the house.

Near the corral was a small and loose lot of specially fine steers, which could be depended on not to stray, as they were fed and salted there, and Sander reasonably supposed that they would be the objective point of the raiders, if any should come along.

The night was somewhat similar to that which had witnessed the death of Flaherty.

Though no storm was brewing, and there was no sign of any impending convulsion of the elements, the sky was pretty thickly covered with scattered clouds, through which now and then the moon shone brightly.

It was not, indeed, a dark night, hardly one that would be chosen by cattle-thieves for their operations, unless they had become emboldened by impunity; but their boldness was what the detective calculated on.

If they did not come that night, they would not long delay another attempt.

Everything happened just as Smart Aleck had wished and expected it to happen.

If he had had the arrangement of the programme himself, it could not have been more satisfactory to him, or have given him a better chance at the prey for which he was lying in wait.

At about the middle of the night, or some-

what later, he noticed a movement among the loose cattle which was, to say the least of it, suspicious.

A portion of them gradually separated themselves from the rest, forming a bunch, and it was clear to his experienced eyes that their movements were directed by human skill and intelligence.

He could see no person who was responsible for the performance, and doubtless the thieves were working on foot, getting the cattle well together, starting them in the right direction, and keeping themselves concealed until the time came to mount and drive off their booty.

Should he pounce down upon them and endeavor to take them in the act?

No—that would be sure to bring on a collision in which he might be worsted, and he did not want to engage in even a successful fight.

So he waited, his only fear being that his horse might make a noise, or its place of concealment might be in some way discovered, and the thieves would then take the alarm and scatter.

Nothing of the kind occurred, and the scheme continued to work to his satisfaction.

As the cattle that had been bunched moved slowly off, keeping well together, and evidently guided in the way they should go, he kept as close to them as he dared, and watched for an "overt act" on the part of their drivers.

It came as soon as he could have expected it, and in a style that thoroughly satisfied him.

Suddenly—there was no telling where the horses had come from—two persons appeared in the rear of the bunch, mounted, and urging forward their booty quietly but energetically.

They were the persons for whom Smart Aleck had been looking, and whom he had so eagerly longed to find.

One of them was a man, and the other was apparently a woman, and their horses, as well as he could judge in the uncertain moonlight, were bay and black.

Directly they began to urge forward the cattle more rapidly, and soon were galloping in the rear of the bunch.

Sander hastened to get his horse, mounted instantly, and started after them, his aim being to keep them in sight, if possible, without discovering his presence to them, and thus to follow them until they finally halted at their home or their haunt.

This plan of procedure, however, was easier to decide upon than to execute.

As the moonlight was not to be depended on, he was obliged to ride rapidly to keep them in sight, and the clatter of his horse's hoofs as he struck a piece of stony ground was borne to their ears and instantly attracted their attention.

For a brief space he saw them riding close together as if in consultation; then one of them—it was the woman—turned dartsly around and raised a rifle.

The pursuer slowed his horse and bent down to avoid the shot; but, considerably to his surprise, no shot was fired.

When he looked up they were both scampering away, and were nearly out of sight.

There could be no doubt that they had determined to make no fight against their single pursuer, but to abandon the cattle and trust to the speed of their horses and their knowledge of the country for escape.

Sander could also trust to his horse, which was a good and game one, and he urged the willing animal forward, his intention being to keep the fugitives in sight without attempting to overtake them.

They gave him a tough chase of it over hills and through ravines, seeming to select for their flight the most difficult ground that was passable for horses.

Nothing was to be seen of the cattle by this time, as they had scattered to the right and left and had been left far in the rear.

The fugitives tried various schemes to throw their pursuer off the track, but without success, as he pushed his horse to its best work, and their erratic course was enabling him to gain on them sensibly.

As he emerged from a little opening that might be called a pass, there was a stretch of nearly open ground before him, and he perceived that the cattle-thieves had separated, the man turning to the right and galloping away at full speed while the woman kept straight on across the open.

It was impossible for him to divide himself into two parties and pursue them both, and he did not need a second to decide upon his course.

He would follow the woman.

He could almost have sworn that he knew who she was, and, as he had more than one reason for wishing to make his pursuit a successful one, he was determined to fire her down and overtake her, if it was in the power of horseflesh to do so.

She was dressed, as he was able to see by the intermittent light when he had her in good view, apparently as she had been described to him by those who had seen her during the pursuit that resulted in the death of Flaherty, in a short frock and a man's sombrero; but there was something about the figure and the style of her

riding that was very familiar to him and increased the ardor of his pursuit.

One backward glance she gave, as if to make sure that the pursuer was not following her companion, and then settled down to swift and steady work.

On the further side of the stretch of comparatively open ground was a piece of timber, and just beyond the timber was a high and steep cliff—a precipice, in fact.

Aleck Sander, who had occasionally studied that country, was well aware of the location and nature of the cliff, and it was to be presumed that the fair fugitive knew it quite as well as he did; yet she kept straight on toward it, seemingly with no idea of swerving to the right or to the left.

It would be, indeed, impossible for her then to turn to the right or the left without allowing him to cut across her course and overtake her, and she must either be captured or go over the cliff.

What could she mean?

She had increased her lead as she entered the timber, and Sander spurred his horse, whose strength was beginning to fail, determined to keep her in sight.

He did keep her in sight; but what he saw was enough to make him wish that he had never begun the chase.

He saw that she kept right on to the edge of the cliff, and then—there was a sudden disappearance—nothing more was seen of her.

There could be no doubt that the black mare and her rider had gone over the cliff!

CHAPTER IX.

A MISTAKE SOMEWHERE.

ALECK SANDER was more than shocked by this unexpected and dreadful occurrence.

He was so completely stunned that he lost control of himself, and pulled so wildly at his horse's bit that the animal stopped suddenly, almost settling down upon its haunches.

After a little while the rider regained his composure and went forward slowly, the truth being that he was actually afraid to approach the scene of that catastrophe.

At the edge of the cliff he halted and satisfied himself that there was no person there, and he knew that the fugitive could not have ridden either to the right or the left without his knowledge.

Therefore there was but one way to account for her disappearance. She had surely gone over the cliff.

Aleck Sander dismounted and examined the ground carefully, finding plain traces of the hoofs of the black mare just at the edge of the cliff, where it seemed that the beautiful animal had at first refused to take the fearful leap, but had finally been forced to do so.

There was nothing else to be seen, and nothing else to be found, except at the foot of the cliff, the distance to which was so great that it made the man shudder to think of it.

Of course there was a mangled mass of mingled horseflesh and once fair human flesh down there; but it was impossible to descend the precipice to view that horrid sight, and the journey around was such a long and difficult one that he could not undertake it at night.

Therefore there was nothing for him to do but to leave the fatal spot, and he returned sadly and disconsolately to the Jonas Ranch, where he found Simon Jonas up and waiting for him.

The Jew had either been on guard for the protection of his precious life against assassins, or was anxious to know what had been accomplished by the man for whose services he was paying.

It is certain that he had not gone to bed, and as soon as Sander rode up he opened upon him a battery of questions.

"Did you do anything?" he eagerly demanded.

"Did you see anything?"

"I have both seen something and done something," answered the detective; "but I must get inside before I can talk about it, and then you must give me something to drink, as I am all broke up."

Simon Jonas hastened to satisfy his guest's demand for stimulus, and Sander seemed really to need it, as he was pale and nervous and generally upset.

"You look as if you had seen a ghost," remarked the ranchman.

"It is worse than that," answered the detective, when the fiery fluid had begun to course through his veins. "I told you that I had seen something and done something, and I wish that what I have done had never happened—that is, I wish that the enterprise had turned out differently."

"What has happened? What did you see?"

"I saw the two cattle-thieves—the same who were seen when your son was out with a party, the night Flaberty was killed. I saw them bunch a lot of cattle and run them off, and I followed them. Give me another bite of that whisky, and I will tell you the whole business from the start."

Sander told his story, winding it up with the statement that the woman had surely gone over the cliff and killed herself.

"That is good news, as I take it," observed Jonas. "One of the rascals is gone, and I am glad of it."

"But it was the woman," objected Sander. "All the better. It was she, as I understand, who killed the Irishman. Anyhow, the gang is broken up."

Of course the detective easily perceived that he could gain nothing by expressing any sort of sympathy for the woman before Simon Jonas, and he desisted from pressing that point.

"I wish it had turned out differently, though," he said. "What I wanted was to catch the rascals, or run them down so that I could identify them and know where to put my hands on them when I want them."

"You know where to put your hands on the woman," said Jonas, with a coarse laugh, "and I suppose you can identify her if you care to look her up."

"I shall surely do that, Mr. Jonas; but I am not so sure of being able to identify her. It is a fearful fall from the top to the bottom of that cliff, and she may be mangled beyond recognition."

"Whoever she may be, she won't steal any more of my cattle, and that is a comfort. When are you going to look for the body?"

"Early in the morning, and I will take with me, if you have no objection, your son Herman and your foreman."

"I would like to go, too. There is a chance that I may know the party."

"It will be safer for you to stay at home, Mr. Jonas. We will bring the body to the house, and you can see it here."

"All right; and now you had better go and turn in, for it's not many hours to morning, and you must be tired, and I am hungry for sleep."

Though Aleck Sander was also weary, he found himself unable to improve the small portion of the night that was left him for sleep.

The last scene of his exciting chase had impressed itself upon him so deeply that he could not shake it off, and when he dropped into a doze his slumber was broken by a vision of the woman and her black mare as they went over the cliff, or lying in a mangled mass at its foot.

Had she deliberately chosen that mode of destruction as an escape from a more dishonorable death, or had she been unaware of the cliff until it was too late to avoid the fatal leap?

In either event, he could not help considering himself responsible for the calamity.

If it had been a man who had gone over the cliff—or even, perhaps, if it had been some other woman—his conscience might not have been touched so acutely; but such a terrible death for that woman hurt him more than he cared to confess to himself.

At daylight he arose unrefreshed; but that was a matter of little consequence, as he was accustomed to fatiguing travel and sleepless nights.

He found the inmates of the house up and astir, as all were early risers, and Simon Jonas, who was never one of the latest, had communicated to his eldest son and his foreman the interesting intelligence brought in by the detective.

Herman Jones and Ralph Harkness were already prepared to go with Sander to find the body and bring it in, and it was only necessary to get their breakfast, which was soon on the table and speedily eaten.

They took an extra horse to carry the body, a blanket to cover or hold the remains, a little light rope and some lunch, and set out before the sun was fairly up.

Aleck Sander described the location of the cliff at the point where the woman had disappeared, and Ralph Harkness, who was thoroughly acquainted with the country, thought that he could lead them by a short cut to the point which they desired to reach.

The route that he chose may have been a short cut, and probably was; but it was surely a very difficult one to travel, and considerable time was required to get the party into the deep valley that lay at the foot of the cliff.

Then it was no easy matter to discover where the woman and horse had gone over, as the aspect of things below was quite different from that above, and the only way to find the remains was to skirt along the base of the cliff, examining the ground carefully as they went.

It was near noon when a sharp cry from Ralph Harkness, who was in the lead, brought his companions quickly to his side.

Aleck Sander shuddered and turned pale as he approached the spot, dreading the sight of the shattered form of that daring and graceful rider; but he was destined to be surprised rather than dismayed.

There lay the black mare, as dead as a horse could be, terribly broken and mangled by the fearful fall.

But there was nothing more!

No body of a woman, mangled or otherwise, and no sign anywhere about of the woman's connection with the catastrophe—not so much as the slightest shred of raiment on any of the bushes or rocks, above or below.

Even the saddle and bridle which the black mare had worn were missing.

CHAPTER X.

A BAFFLED DETECTIVE.

SMART ALECK was again astounded, but this time his senses were aroused by anger rather than stupefied by another emotion.

He perceived that he had been duped; but could not understand how or by whom the defrauding had been done, and the most careful examination of the locality did not enable him to decide that point with any degree of clearness.

"Her friends have come here and carried her off," declared Harkness.

"How could they know that she had fallen over the cliff?" demanded the detective. "Can you find any signs to show that they have been here?"

"There was nothing of the kind. If the body had been carried away, it must have been taken on a horse; but there were no horse-tracks anywhere about there, except those which they knew to have been made by their own horses."

Harkness fancied that he found some faint footprints that might have been made by a woman; but the ground was so hard, and the signs were so very faint, that his companions thought his fancy of no importance.

"Perhaps she was carried off by wild beasts," observed Herman Jonas.

"There ain't any wild beasts about here that could take off a human body," replied the foreman. "If they'd eaten her, there'd be plenty to show for that. Then again, they couldn't have swallowed the saddle and bridle."

"Perhaps she came down all right, and was not killed by the fall."

"That is just nonsense. Perhaps she didn't come down at all, but stayed up there when the horse went over."

"I was right at her heels," objected Sander, "and saw nothing of her up yonder. Do you suppose that I would have missed seeing her if she had been there?"

"It is all a mystery, then," observed Harkness.

"It is a mystery that I mean to unravel, if it takes a month of Sundays. There is nothing here but the horse to show for the performance of last night; but that is enough to vouch for the truth of my story, if anybody doubts it."

If either of the others doubted it, he kept his doubt to himself.

"I think I know where that black mare came from," continued the detective, "and I am going to settle that point at once. If the woman and the mare are both gone from where they ought to be, I shall find out what has become of them."

"Do you want us to go with you, or either of us?" inquired Harkness.

"No, thank you. You could not help me, and might be in my way. Go back and tell Mr. Jonas what we found and missed finding, and say to him that I hope to solve the mystery before night."

Smart Aleck mounted and rode rapidly in the direction of Small Hopes Ranch, endeavoring to take the shortest route that would enable him to reach that point.

The trouble that had prevented him from sleeping, together with the sorrow, if not actual remorse, that had taken possession of him after the cliff catastrophe, had vanished, and in the place of those emotions was a feeling of hurt and anger, as if he had been shamefully imposed upon, and it was necessary for him to get even with somebody.

He was almost as sure of the identity of the woman as he was of that of the black mare, and it seemed to him that the evidence he could bring against them both would be quite irresistible.

Thus it was that when he reached the Halsey ranch, at a late hour in the afternoon, he had nearly worked himself into a passion.

He was prepared to carry the matter forward with a high hand, and to allow nothing to stand in the way of probing the mystery to the bottom.

A surprise awaited him, of which he could not even have dreamed.

As he hitched his horse in front of the house, who should come running out to meet him but Victoria Halsey?

He had never seen her look more fresh and chipper, and her face was radiant with smiles as she greeted him.

Surely she was not dead, and it was quite unreasonable to suppose that she had passed the greater portion of the night in exciting and perilous experiences.

Smart Aleck was so badly upset by her presence and her appearance, that for a moment he forgot the story which he had carefully prepared as an excuse for coming there, and he could not prevent his countenance from showing surprise and something more.

"You look as if you had seen a ghost," remarked Victoria.

"It is not a ghost that I see now, though."

"Indeed it is not, though I am nearly dead of loneliness, and I am glad you have come. Step right in, now, and tell me all the news, for I am sure that you have some for us."

Sander followed her into the house, where he

found Mrs. Halsey and Jack, who greeted him coldly but politely.

Mainly for their benefit he hastened to repeat the little yarn that was to account for his presence there.

There was not much of it—merely an unimportant statement concerning the doings of Dan Markell and his friends, and it did not happen to be true, as Sander had not been in Oro Fino since his first visit to Small Hopes Ranch; but that point was not likely to be discovered by his auditors.

Directly Mrs. Halsey went out to look after supper, and Jack followed her, leaving the detective alone with Victoria.

"I can't believe, Mr. Sander," she said pleasantly, "that the little story you told us was your real reason for coming here to-day. Confess, now, that you came to see me."

"I do confess it, Miss Halsey. It already seems to me an age since I last saw you, and I hoped to hear from you, but got no word. There was another reason, too, though that is a matter of pure selfishness on my part."

"What is the other reason?"

"I have fallen in love with that beautiful black mare of yours, and I wanted to ask you if by any possibility you could be induced to sell her."

"Sell Myra?" indignantly exclaimed the girl. "I would have to sell myself with her, then. Of course I would not part with my beauty and my pet. And that reminds me, Mr. Sander, of a dreadful dream I had last night—a dream that made me doleful all day."

"What was that terrible dream?" inquired the detective, who felt that he might be on the eve of a revelation.

"I dreamed that the darling was dead, that she had got a terrible fall—I don't know how—and had been killed."

If Smart Aleck had put his thought into words, it would have been something like this:

"Oho! she knows that I suspect her, or a guilty conscience needs no accuser. Now I may expect to hear a story that has been manufactured to account for the absence of the black mare. But it will not deceive me, and I shall insist upon knowing how it is that she is not also missing."

"What he did say was this:

"I hope that when you awoke you did not discover that your dream was true?"

"I am happy to say that I did not, though the very thought of it has bothered me all day. Myra was quite well, except that she had hurt her high fore foot by getting it caught in the fence, I suppose."

Hurt her high fore foot! Sander was certain that something much worse than that was the matter with the black mare which he had left at the foot of the cliff.

If the girl was speaking the truth, the fabric of his suspicions, which were almost positive proofs, had tumbled down.

"Poor thing!" said the detective, though there was little sympathy in his tone just then. "Suppose we go out and see her."

"Just what I was going to ask you to do. Jack has been making a warm mash for her, and I want to give it to her, if he will keep that brute of a bay horse off while she eats it."

The three went out together—Jack with the mash, and Victoria and Smart Aleck following him.

There in the grass lot were the two horses—the fine bay gelding and the beautiful black mare—placidly cropping the short grass, just as he had seen them when he visited the ranch before.

As the detective was not capable of being stunned any more, he accepted this astounding fact as a fact, and stared stupidly at the two animals, principally at the black mare.

Victoria called "Myra!" and her pet, pricking up its ears, came trotting to her, and thrust its nose through the rails, while she patted and fondled it.

Then Jack caught the bay horse and hitched him, and Victoria gave the mare the mash, watching her as she ate it, and pointing out the sore on her foot, which proved to be nothing but a scratch.

He had nothing more to say about purchasing the mare, as the object of his visit had been accomplished, greatly to his dissatisfaction.

There was just one consolation for him, and that was found in the fact that Victoria Halsey was not dead. Whoever had gone over the cliff, it was surely not she.

He accepted an invitation to stay to supper, which was extended to him as a matter of course; but nobody asked him to stay over night, and he left at an early hour, after securing a promise from Victoria that she would try to see him before long and "talk over matters."

"What did he come here to-day for, Victoria?" inquired Mrs. Halsey, when he had left the place.

"Don't you know, ma? That is the man who chased Jack and me last night, and I was ever so glad that he did, as I had laid a plan to bother him, and the plan worked admirably. Could it have worked better, Jack?"

"It was too dangerous for you, dear," answered her brother.

"The danger was nothing—only a bit of fun.

When I was sure that he had settled down to follow me, I had him just where I wanted him. The mare came near shying at the edge of the cliff, and then I was troubled for just the least little part of a second. But she took the jump, and I swung myself off just as she went over, catching the low branch of a tree, and before he came near I was hid in a hole where he would never have thought of looking for me. Then I got down into the valley by a slant I knew, gobbled up my saddle and bridle, and was well on the way home when Jack found me and helped me."

"You must not run any more such risks," hesitated Mrs. Halsey.

"I don't mean to, ma—none of that sort, anyhow. The profit don't pay for the trouble and risk. We must try some other way of worrying Simon Jonas—some way that will hurt him worse, though it does sting him terribly to get wounded in the pocket nerve."

"I would like to know what the detective thought could have become of you," observed Jack.

"That is just what he came here to find out, and if you had seen his face when I met him, you would have known what his thought was. Why, the sight of me nearly paralyzed him. Of course he had been out there at the foot of the cliff, and he had a sure thing on the black mare; so I paralyzed him again by showing him the beauty in the lot."

"What will he believe now?"

"What can he believe? It was easy to see that he suspected me, and that he meant to trap me if he could. Since he has become convinced that I could not have had anything to do with the cattle raids, nobody will be able to make him believe anything against me."

"Who is it, then, sis, that has been getting away with the cattle?"

"That is for him to find out, and I don't envy him the job. It seems to me that I must be out of his black list now, and of course you are with me, Jack. If he is sure that I had nothing to do with the business, he will have to look for some other girl and some other black mare."

CHAPTER XI.

SIMON JONAS HAS DOUBTS.

"SOME other girl and some other black mare."

It was just the thought that was in Smart Aleck's mind as he rode away from Small Hopes Ranch, and the mystery which he had hoped to solve so easily had proved to be too much for him.

His theory had been so reasonable, and the facts had come in to fit it so beautifully, that he had been quite certain of discovering the criminals he was seeking; but suddenly he found his theories and facts destroyed together by the palpable presence of a girl and a black mare.

Of course he was compelled to admit that it could not have been Victoria Halsey and her black mare whom he had chased the night before, and yet he had been so strongly convinced of the identity of each of them that he would have sworn to it.

As it was not Victoria Halsey, who was it?

Had she a double, and had her black mare a double? If so, what had become of the female person who went over the cliff?

Was it all a figment of the brain, an illusion of the senses, a dream that was as bad as a nightmare?

He was all at sea, or, rather, was thrown out into the darkness, and would be forced to grope his own way from that time forward, with the additional disadvantage of knowing that the false clew would bother him in his efforts to find the true one.

As far as he could see then, his only chance would be to watch for the cattle-thieves again, and pursue them to the bitter end; but as he could not persuade himself to doubt that one of them had actually gone over the cliff, he was strongly inclined to believe that there would be no more raids.

He was unwilling to go and confess his failure to Simon Jonas just then, and he wanted to rest and turn the puzzle in his mind; so he went direct to Oro Fino and settled down for the night at the hotel.

In the morning he rode out to the Jonas Ranch, where he was eagerly and excitedly greeted by the proprietor.

"Come right in and tell me the news," insisted the old man. "Why didn't you show up here last night? From the message you sent, I expected you, sure. What's the matter with you? You don't look this time as if you had seen a ghost. Are you going to want some whisky before you can tell?"

"I can speak plain enough when you give me a chance to get my words in," answered Sander, "and I won't object to the whisky, though I have not seen a ghost this time. I have struck something dead, though."

"Something dead? What is dead now?"

The detective waited until he had sampled the ranchman's liquor before he remarked:

"The deadest thing that I know of is the notion I had in my head about those cattle-thieves."

Ralph Harkness and Herman Jonas came in, shortly followed by Ike Jonas.

"What do you mean?" demanded the old man. "You don't mean to say that the girl—"

"Let me tell it, and then you will know what I do mean. My idea was that Jack Halsey and his sister were the cattle-thieves."

"Of course it was—mine too."

"When I saw them and chased them night before last, I was sure of it, because I knew that they owned a horse and black mare, such as the thieves rode, and when the woman I was chasing went over the cliff, I supposed that Victoria Halsey was dead."

"She ought to be, Lord knows!" interrupted the old man. "I hope you don't mean to say that she is alive and well."

"Of course Harkness and Herman told you how we found the black mare at the foot of the cliff, and nothing else. Then I hurried to the Halsey Ranch to see what had become of the Halsey girl and her black mare, and there I found them both, not only alive and well, but as gay and chipper as you please."

"And so you conclude," observed Simon Jonas, "that she and her brother had nothing to do with stealing my cattle."

"What other conclusion can I come to? I can't believe that she and her black mare went over the cliff, and therefore she and her brother were not the parties I chased that night."

The old man bent his brows and seemed to think deeply before he spoke again.

"She has fooled you," he said, at last.

"And I am so easy to fool," sneered the detective.

"That girl would fool the devil, Mr. Sander. I know something of her and her stock, and can give her credit for being as smart as a steel-trap."

"Will you kindly inform me how you think she can have fooled me?"

"I don't know how it was done, but she did it. That makes your job a tougher one, Mr. Sander; but the lines you were working on are, in my opinion, the same that you must continue to work on, and you now know the sort of thing you may expect."

"What is to be done, then, in your opinion?"

"You will have to keep on watching for those cattle-thieves and run them down, and catch them or kill them. For that purpose you shall have all the help you need, and I firmly believe that the result will be the wiping out of Tom Halsey's rascally brood."

"What you suggest, Mr. Jonas, is the plan I had proposed to myself, though I doubt whether there will be any more raids."

"I think there will be. The scoundrels may wait a while, expecting this fuss to die out, but they are not likely to give up the business."

"There can be no harm in supposing that somebody else may have been getting after your cattle. Is there no other young man and young woman in this region for whom those two may have been mistaken?"

"Nobody who can have the same grudge that they claim to have. I don't know much about the women in Oro Fino; but my son Isaac can probably give you all the information you want in that line."

Ike Jonas, who had been following the conversation slowly, spoke up for himself, without noticing his father's evident sneer.

"There are plenty of girls there who are tough enough for such a job, and some of them may be smart enough, and of course they could get plenty of men to go in with them; but I don't know of any that I could put my finger on as being more liable to suspicion than the rest. If you folks will tell me all you know about those two—what they look like and all that—I may be able to give some sort of a guess."

Aleck Sander, who had followed the raiders pretty closely and had observed them keenly, gave as good a description as he could of their personal appearance, including their style of dressing and of their horses, and in this was assisted by Ralph Harkness, who had also got a good view of them.

It was the opinion of those two that the cattle-thieves, if they were not Jack Halsey and his sister, were enough like them to be easily mistaken for them at a little distance.

"That's who it must be," was the opinion of Ike. "I think the governor is right about that, and that he is right in saying that they ain't likely to give up the business. I don't know of anybody in Oro Fino who would answer to that description; but of course most anybody could dress in that style, and dress goes for a good deal. I shall keep my eyes open, and if any such gang of two goes out of Oro Fino, I will be apt to know it."

"And that will give you a good excuse," suggested the old man, "for spending all your time in Oro Fino, instead of three-fourths of it. If you are of any service to us in this business, it will be the first useful thing you have done in a long time."

CHAPTER XII.

NOT TO BE BLUFFED.

HORACE EXTON and Carl Klein worked industriously and patiently at their hole in the

ground, and soon began to receive such rich rewards for their labor that they were highly elated by the prospect before them.

The German was deeply repentant because of his discouragement when his partner was so plucky and determined, and proved his repentance by putting into the joint enterprise the best use of his brain and muscle.

Though they got the ore out slowly, its richness surprised them, and when they sent a lot of it away for milling, their opinion of its value was fully confirmed.

As a matter of course, the news of such a discovery could not be kept a secret, even if the owners of Hole in the Ground Mine had wished to keep it a secret, and they were not at all inclined to be reticent about it.

They wanted those who had been so ready to laugh at them when their mine was only "the hole in the ground" to confess themselves false prophets and acknowledge their stupidity, and to that end they boasted loudly enough of what they were getting and expected to get from that hole in the ground.

Oro Fino was overjoyed by these developments, because they proved that the region thereabout, which had been nearly abandoned as a mining district, was still capable of producing pay ore if rightly worked, and therefore the town might reasonably expect another boom.

Prospectors started out in all directions, and enterprises were easily floated that would not have been touched a little while before.

Plenty of people, moved by interest or curiosity, came out there to look at the Hole in the Ground and judge its value, and were permitted to view just as much as the proprietors wished them to see, and no more.

From these visits, and from reports about the property that were spread far and wide, offers came to the partners from capitalists and speculators, who wanted to buy the mine, or put money in it for the purpose of developing it.

The truth was that the discovery at the Hole in the Ground was so unexpected and generally surprising, that some people lost their heads over it.

More than one of the offers was so liberal that Carl Klein was seriously disposed to consider the question of acceptance; but his partner objected.

"If it is worth so much to them," he remarked, "it is worth quite as much to us, and we are able to hold on if we want to. If the performance hereafter proves to be as good as the prospect is now, the mine will pay for its own working, and we will be able to run it without giving a share to anybody."

"You are right about that," answered Klein; "but will the performance equal the promise?"

"That's where you have got me, Carl. I hope it will, but must confess that I have my doubts about it. It may be that what we are working at now is only a pocket, and if so, it will soon peter out, though it will probably pay us well for the trouble of opening the hole."

"If it should turn out to be a pocket, Exton, and we should have to face that fact, it would be a good time then for us to accept one of those offers."

"I hadn't thought of that. Of course it would not be a fair thing to do, but, by Jove! it would be a good temptation."

So the two partners continued to work at the Hole in the Ground steadily, getting out the ore slowly but surely, with no help but that of faithful Lemon Squeezer.

If there were any secrets about that mine, they intended to keep them to themselves.

As the pocket, if it was a pocket, showed no sign of an intention to speedily peter out, they began to believe that their trouble on that score was only fanciful; but they soon had some real trouble that came in an unexpected way and from an unexpected quarter.

It was their nooning hour, and, as the day was hot, they were taking life easy with their pipes in front of the cabin after eating, when they noticed two horsemen coming toward them.

At first they supposed them to be a couple of men who had come to "dicker" about the mine, or casual visitors to take a look at it; but shortly they recognized them as people they had met in Oro Fino, and who had never before been seen about the Hole in the Ground.

"One of them is Herman Jonas," observed Exton, "and the other is Ralph Harkness, Simon Jonas's foreman. What the deuce can they be coming here for?"

"Perhaps Simon Jonas wants to buy the mine," suggested Carl.

"If he does, it will be useless talk, as I know that he won't begin to equal some of the offers we have had. That man is noted for wanting something for nothing."

The visitors rode up to the cabin, but were evidently in no hurry to dismount.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen," was Exton's cordial greeting. "Light down and give us the news."

"It is not worth while," coldly answered Herman Jonas. "We have no time to stop here, and we can attend to our business just as well as we are."

"If you happen to want to buy our mine, I

may as well tell you at the start that we have no mine to sell."

"That is a fact, if you refer to any mine on this ground. I have a message to deliver to you about your mine, as you call it."

"Shoot it right off, then, and let me advise you to use a proper degree of politeness, as we rule the roost here, and we are not the most patient men in the world."

"You won't rule it long. My message is that you will have to get away from here."

"Have to what?"

"Have to get away from here, I said."

As the tall Englishman suddenly rose and straightened himself up, Herman Jonas involuntarily reined back his horse.

"Young man!" thundered Exton, "you have utterly and stupidly disregarded my injunction concerning politeness, and I ought to tell you right now to get away from here, under penalty of having your head broken and your spoonful of brains spilt out; but I don't suppose that you really know any better, and I am curious to find out what rotten folly has brought you here."

"That's right, Mr. Exton," put in Ralph Harkness. "Give him a chance to tell his story, and if he don't mix up a little more politeness with it, I'll break his head myself, and save you the trouble."

Thus advised by two persons who were well able to enforce this advice, Herman Jonas spoke more mildly, and with probably as much politeness as he was capable of putting into his speech.

"It is my father's message, not mine," said he. "He directs me to say to you, Mr. Exton, and to your partner, that he owns this land, and you are trespassers here, and therefore you will have to leave."

"Does Mr. Simon Jonas labor under the impression that he owns the earth?" inquired the Englishman.

"He is sure that he owns this piece of it, anyhow, as he has taken pains to see that his title is good, and he means to keep what is his."

"And as much more as he can lay his hands on, I presume. As he is so sure of his title, and we have been occupying this ground for several months, I would like to know why he has waited so long before making his claim."

"I suppose he thought that you were doing no harm here."

"No good, you mean. As long as he thought that we were doing no good here, he let us alone; but, since our work has begun to count, he wants to step in and take what we have been working for. Have the kindness to tell him, my young friend, that he can't get it."

"He will take it when he wants it," replied Herman, "as he has the law on his side."

He had better look over his hand before he chips in. Whatever his title to the land may be our claim has been properly made and duly recorded, and we can hold the mine. We mean to hold it, too."

"Perhaps," suggested Ralph Harkness, "you had better have a settlement—some sort of a give and take arrangement. Simon Jonas is a rich man you know, and money counts for a good deal."

"I think you mean well, Harkness," answered the Englishman; "but you may be a bit prejudiced. We don't mean to give an inch, and Simon Jonas can't take anything from us that don't belong to him. If he ever gets this mine without paying for it, it will be worth nothing to us, as we will both be dead then, and you can put that in your diary."

"Then I have to say—" broke in Herman Jonas.

"Not another word," interrupted Exton. "The last word has been spoken, and your style of talk doesn't please me. The best thing you can do now is to go where you belong."

The two visitors rode away, Harkness being the only one who had politeness enough to bid the miners a respectful adieu.

"What do you think of that, Carl?" inquired Exton.

The German replied, with a bit of profanity to give emphasis to the sentiment, that it was the iciest piece of impudence that he had ever heard of.

"That is just what it is," assented Exton. "We are safe enough as far as the law goes, and it is likely that somebody will get hurt before we give up any of our rights. That Jew fancies that because he has money he can run this district and set himself up as a little king; but he will discover his mistake before he gets through with us."

The "pocket" trouble, also, soon became a real affliction. The pay ore rapidly "petered out," and it became evident to the partners that their rich find was only a pocket which they had already nearly exhausted.

At this Carl Klein grew discouraged again, and proposed to his partner that they should abandon the work and let Simon Jonas take their belongings if he wanted them.

"Not a bit of it," firmly replied Exton. "I have faith in the mine, and fully believe that we shall yet strike a true fissure vein if we persevere. Besides I am so infernally obstinate, Carl, that even if I believed that the work

would end in failure, I would keep at it, just to spite Simon Jonas, and to give him to understand that we are not to be bluffed off."

CHAPTER XIII.

IKY'S LITTLE GAME.

It was not for nothing that Isaac Jonas had got from Aleck Sander and Ralph Harkness all the information they could give him concerning the two cattle-thieves.

He meant to use it, but not exactly in the manner which he had declared to them.

As his father had predicted, his self-imposed task caused him to spend nearly all his time in Oro Fino, or at least away from home; but he did not give any part of it to a search for the persons whose descriptions he had asked for, as he was convinced that they would not be found anywhere about any of his usual haunts.

There was not one of the tough girls of Oro Fino whom he could suppose to be equal to such an enterprise, and he believed, as his father did, that both the desperadoes, as well as the bay horse and the black mare, were to be found at Small Hopes Ranch.

His real intention was developed a few nights after that family meeting, in an interview with his most intimate friend and crony, Dave Strang, son of that Cephas Strang who had been fatally shot by Jack Halsey.

For the purpose of holding this interview, and to avoid the possibility of listeners, the two young men went quite beyond the limits of Oro Fino, to a sequestered spot where no person was likely to come nigh them.

It may also be mentioned, as suggestive of the importance of the interview, that Ike Jonas had not patronized the saloons as freely as usual. He was, therefore, passably sober, and the same may be said of Dave Strang.

"The fact is, Dave," observed Ike, "that you and I are both pretty durned hard up, and we have got to do something to make a raise."

"I know that I am hard-up," answered Dave, "as I am nearly down to my last dollar; but I didn't suppose that anything so bad was the matter with you."

"It is, though," said Ike, and he proceeded to speak very disrespectfully of his father.

"That confounded Jew who runs our ranch shut down on my supplies some time ago. He told me that unless I would stay at home and work on the ranch I should not get another dollar from him. He kept his word, too. He always does keep his word in anything of that kind. Ma furnished me with funds for a while; but I was too much for her, and she had to go out of the business. If the head of the Jonas family knew what I am owing here in Oro Fino, it would make his eyes stick out so that we could hang our hats on them."

"And what I owe, without the faintest prospect of paying, scares me so that I am tempted to skip the town."

"So here we are, Dave, over head and ears in debt, with expensive habits, and without a chance to get hold of an honest dollar unless we go to work."

"That's just where we are."

"But there's the other kind of dollars to be had, Dave, and there's no reason why we shouldn't get hold of them as other people do."

"What do you mean, Ike? Give it to me plain and straight. I am ready for anything that's got money in it."

"I am going to put you up, Dave, to a dead open and shut scheme of running off cattle."

"There's risk in that."

"There's risk in everything that's got money in it, but precious little in this, the way I mean to work it."

"Give me the scheme, Ike. I am just perishing for something that will put money in my pocket."

"I suppose you know," began the schemer, "that a good many cattle have been run off from the Jonas Ranch lately. The thieves don't take many at a time, but manage to get the best of the lot, such as are the easiest marketed. It has been found out that there are two of them, a man and a woman, and the man rides a bay horse, and the woman rides a black mare, and I know just how they are togged."

"Is it a reward that you are after?" inquired Dave Strong.

"Of course it is not. What would a reward be worth to us? We must go for something bigger and better than that. My scheme will fetch it, and will be nothing but fun to us."

"I can't see what you are trying to get at."

"The identity of those two raiders is a bit tangled just now. The governor is pretty sure that they are Jack Halsey and his sister, because they have a strong grudge against him, and because nobody's cattle but his have been run off in a long time, and because they ride a bay horse and a black mare, and because he is just that kind of a scalawag, and she is a dare-devil of a rider."

"Those reasons seem to be sound enough."

"But the governor has hired a detective, who claims to have chased the raiders a few nights ago, and to have driven the woman and her black mare over a cliff where the fall was bound to kill them. Sure enough, the horse was found at the foot of the cliff, as dead as a hammer; but

there was no sign of the woman. Then the detective went right on to the Halsey Ranch, where he found the Halsey girl and her black mare alive and sound. So he jumped to the conclusion that the raiders had not come from there.

"That looks like a safe jump," observed Dave. "Don't it upset your dad's theory?"

"He don't think it does. It is his opinion that some very smart game has been played, though he can't pretend to say what it is, and he believes that the same raiders will keep on running off cattle, though they may let up for a while."

"As you say, Ike, there is something of a tangle in that; but I don't yet see what it has to do with us, or what we are to get out of it."

"That's where I am smarter than you; but I have been studying the thing up, and you haven't. It is just as easy as rolling off a log to run off cattle about here and get rid of them, and when there is somebody to put the blame on I don't see what's to hinder you and me from going into the business. I will tog up as the girl, and you will play the part of the man, and we will get a bay horse and a black mare, and nobody will ever suspect us of having anything to do with the raids."

"I believe you are right about that; but, suppose we should get caught in the act?"

"Of course we will have to run some risk; but there is precious little danger of that. It is not a bit likely that anybody will be able to catch us, and I don't believe that anybody will try very hard, as suspicion will rest right away on those other two, and the folks who lose the cattle will know just where to find them and how to go for them."

"What will we do with the cattle?"

"That is all fixed. I know a gang—and you know some of them—who will be glad to take them off our hands, and they will give us shelter and help, too, if we should be hard pressed. All we will have to do will be to pick out the cattle and drive them to the place where they are wanted."

Dave Strang was almost satisfied, but still had an objection to offer.

"As your father has employed a detective," said he, "it is likely that the cattle on the Jonas Ranch will be watched so closely as to hurt our chances."

"We needn't interfere with his stock—at least not yet. I would as soon take his as anybody's else, and we'll know just how to work the scheme when his turn comes; but at first we will make a strike somewhere else, so as to bother him and get his attention turned in another direction. Then we will swoop down on him and teach him that there is more than one way of buying supplies."

"It is a good scheme," observed Dave Strang, after a little further reflection, "and there seems to be nothing to hinder us from working it, if the gang you speak of is all right. It promises to put money in our pocket, and to give us a good chance to hurt Jack Halsey, which will suit me way down to the ground."

"I was sure that you would see it in that light, Dave, and all that remains is to arrange the details. The only trouble I perceive is in getting used to a side-saddle."

CHAPTER XIV.

DAN MARKELL'S MEAN SCHEME.

IKE JONAS and Dave Strang were not by any means the only enemies that Jack Halsey had in Oro Fino, nor the only persons who were plotting against him.

Dan Markell, though the sudden death of his father had put him in possession of a good bit of property, was not on that account any the less disposed to visit vengeance upon his father's slayer, nor did he forget what was due to the memory of the old man.

He had registered a vow, and had soaked it in the best liquor his establishment afforded, that the scalp of Jack Halsey should dangle at his belt ere many moons; but, as he was by nature cautious, with a respect for the law and a due regard for his own person, he proposed to keep on the safe side, so that he might hurt his adversary without harming himself.

He was only biding his time, waiting until he could get a good chance to take Jack Halsey un-awares.

As Jack kept away from Oro Fino after the death of Nick Markell, and took very good care of himself, there was no good chance to waylay him or "double-bank" him, and Dan began to get tired of waiting.

So he determined to use his father's money and his own influence as the proprietor of a big saloon to subsidize a band who should obey his orders, and the main object of this organization was to be the wiping out of Jack Halsey from the face of the earth.

No person in Oro Fino was better able than he was to secure such assistance as he wanted, as Nick Markell had left him a legacy of roughs and rustlers who were largely dependent upon the saloon, and who could easily be persuaded to any purpose but a decent one by the liberal use of whisky and money.

This band, though few in number, was well supplied with courage when there was no lack of tanglefoot, and was organized and partially disciplined under the immediate control of Rat-

lesnake Tom, a local celebrity who could show the scars of several rattlesnake bites, and could proudly point to whisky as the antidote for that variety of poison.

For fear that the old virus might take hold of him again, he kept his flesh saturated with the sovereign remedy.

Dan Markell and Rattlesnake Tom had a consultation in the rear of a horse-shed near the Markell saloon, and it happened that Lemon Squeezer, who had been sent to Oro Fino on an errand by Horace Exton, had hitched his horse in the shed.

It also happened that the Italian went there for his horse just after the consultation was begun.

A statement by one of the men outside attracted his attention, and he listened eagerly to the remainder of the talk.

"There is one way to strike Jack Halsey," Dan was saying, "that will hurt him more than anything else we can do—more than killing him."

"What's that?" inquired the hero of the rattlesnakes.

"We must strike him through his sister."

"She's a sorter tough subject to handle, too, I reckon."

"It will be queer if the five of us can't handle her when we catch her out alone."

"How're you goin' to ketch her out alone?"

"I have got that down as fine as silk. I've been sneakin about to get a chance at Jack Halsey, and have dropped on her ways. There is a Chinese settlement down near Pinyon Pass, and old Sol Meek has been a sort of a boss of the Chinese there. Old Sol has been laid up with the rheumatiz for some time back, and Vic Halsey rides down there twice every week to tote him things and kind o' look after him. She is as regular as clockwork about it, getting there about four o'clock in the afternoon, and this is one of her days. All we've got to do is to go down there quietly and gobble her up."

"Jest as easy as lyin'." What'll you do with her when you git her?"

"No matter what I'll do. You may bet your life that Jack Halsey will never see her again."

"It looks to be a good scheme and a safe 'un."

"And we will work it this very day. Let's go and wet it up, Tom, and get the boys together."

Lemon Squeezer was well aware of the fact that Victoria Halsey was one of Horace Exton's special friends, and he knew that the plot he had just listened to was the most important information he could possibly convey to his patron.

He also knew that there was no time to be lost, and the news must be carried with the utmost possible speed.

He could hardly wait for the confederates to withdraw before he led out his horse, mounted, and rode off at a headlong gallop.

It is probable that the horse which the Italian rode had never before been put to such speed, and it is certain that Lemon Squeezer had never before ridden so hard and so fast.

When he reached the Hole in the Ground, the horse was nearly wind-broken, panting, and in a lather of sweat, and the Italian was so completely exhausted that he nearly fell from his seat.

Almost breathlessly he told his story, or gave such outlines as would enable his hearers to guess at the rest, and dropped in a swoon.

"Get your gun and come with me, Carl!" shouted Exton as he started off.

"But here is Lemon Squeezer in a bad fix. What will we do with him?"

"Leave your flask of whisky there by him. He will come to directly, and will be all right!"

In a few minutes the horses were saddled, and the two partners were mounted.

"It is a long ride to the old mine at Pinyon Pass," observed the Englishman as he consulted his watch. "We will have to hump ourselves, Carl, to get there in time."

Dan Markell had indeed "dropped onto" one of Victoria Halsey's ways.

At the very time when he and Rattlesnake Tom were plotting behind the horse-shed in Oro Fino, that young woman was preparing to go and visit the invalid at Pinyon Pass.

Old Sol Meek had been a special friend of her father's, and when he was sick and in trouble the Halsey family did not forget or neglect him.

The old man had bought the right to work the abandoned mine down there and get what he could out of the "tailings," and for that purpose had employed a gang of careful and industrious Chinamen.

In this enterprise he contracted rheumatism, which afflicted him so badly that for several weeks he was unable to leave his cabin or scarcely to stir from his bed, and there he lay helpless, waited on by a Chinaman who was attentive and useful as far as his ability allowed him to be.

Jack Halsey had found him there, and had represented the old man's case at home, and thereafter Victoria had been, as Dan Markell had discovered, a semi-weekly visitor at Sol

Meek's cabin, always cheering him with her bright presence, as well as bringing him delicate and nourishing food such as his Chinaman could not prepare.

Hardly anything could be meaner than to regard such an errand of mercy as a chance for an outrageous attack; but Dan Markell and his associates were not moved by any considerations of delicacy or propriety.

On this occasion, for the first time, Mrs. Halsey was strangely opposed to the visit, and endeavored to dissuade Victoria from leaving the house.

"You go out too much alone, my dear," said she, "and I am afraid that harm may come to you. Suppose you stay at home to-day, and let Jack go in your place, or send Dave Wisner."

"Why, ma, the old man would be all broken up if he should fail to see me, and you know that he calculates on my visits. Besides, I have often been there, and have seen no sign of danger."

"But you know what is said about the pitcher that goes often to the well."

"Anybody who tries to break me will discover that I am no common crockery, but pretty stout and solid ware. In fact, I am a pitcher-in. You needn't worry about me, ma, as Myra and I are fully able to take care of ourselves."

With this conviction she mounted her black mare and set out, light-hearted and well-loaded.

When she entered Sol Meek's cabin, at about the hour named by Dan Markell, she and her basket of dainties were joyfully received.

Wo Sing, the Chinaman, grinned until he showed all his ivories, and the face of the invalid lighted up instantly.

"It is so good of you, my child, to come and see the old man," said he. "Wo Sing ain't what might be called the best of company, though he means well and does all he can, and I have just been lookin' and longin' for you."

"But how is the rheumatism, Uncle Sol? It seems to me that you look brighter than when I was here last, and I hope you are feeling better."

"A heap better, my dear. I reckon I'll be up and out in a few days, and then you needn't worry about me no more. It's a great joy to have you come; but I'm afraid it has been a bother to you."

"No bother at all—only a pleasure; but my mother has been a little troubled lately, and to-day she tried to persuade me not to come, because she had got it in her head that some harm might happen to me."

"She's right about it, honey. I'd rather be tied up in a knot with rheumatiz all the rest o' my days than have any harm happen to you. Your folks have had trouble enough, and I don't want any more to come along."

"I suppose you know, Uncle Sol, that my brother Jack has killed Nick Markell."

"I heerd o' that; but 'twas in fa'r fight, and I hope Jack 'll keep out o' the killin' business arter this."

"He killed that man because he was one of my father's murderers."

"So I reckoned; but the boss of the job is goin' around yet and doin' well."

Victoria drew her seat closer to the bedside, and spoke in a lower tone and more earnestly.

"Uncle Sol, you were my father's particular friend, and you know more about him than anybody else except his own family. Do you believe that he was guilty as he was charged?"

"Not a bit of it! Nary time! That's one man who mought straighten that business up if he could be got hold of, and that's Zeke Streen; but he lit out arter Tom Halsey was killed, and hain't been heerd of sence. He knew more about it than any other man, less it was Si Jonas."

"Then you think that Simon Jonas knows all about it?"

"In course he does. 'Twas he who put up the job. He wanted mighty bad to git hold of some land that Tom Halsey owned, which Tom wasn't willin' to sell it, and had to git him out o' the way. Poor Tom was got out o' the way, and now Si Jonas owns that land."

"That is true. Hark! I thought I heard some horses."

Sol Meek thought that he heard them, too; but directly the sounds ceased, as if the horses had passed by or taken another direction, and Victoria began to take out the dainties which she had brought in her basket and give them in charge of the Chinaman.

Suddenly the cabin door flew open, and one man after another began to push into the room, and Vic Halsey at once recognized the first who entered as Dan Markell.

"What do you want here?" she demanded, as she backed into a corner and felt for her revolver.

"We want you!" shouted the young man, and he and Rattlesnake Tom threw themselves upon her and seized her before she could draw the pistol.

"You cowards!" was all she could utter as she panted and struggled in vain with her brutal assailants.

Sol Meek was able to pull a pistol from under his pillow, and he fired it at the raiders, striking one of them in the shoulder; but it was

quickly snatched from his feeble hand, and a savage blow reduced him to quietness.

Wo Sing sent forth from his thin lips a piercing scream, and was immediately knocked down and kicked into silence.

"Bring her out!" ordered Dan Markell, and he and Rattlesnake Tom dragged the girl, struggling but not shrieking, through the door and out of the cabin.

There an unexpected and powerful foe awaited them.

Horace Exton, who had just reached the spot and jumped from his horse, set to work in true British fashion, delivering blow after blow straight from the shoulder with his bare knuckles.

The first blow sent Dan Markell sprawling on the ground, the second made Rattlesnake Tom dizzy, and the British boxer followed up his attack as vigorously as if he had the entire burden of the fight to bear.

But he did not have it all on his shoulders, as Carl Klein stood there with a cocked revolver, watching for a hostile movement that needed sudden repression, and Vic Halsey, freed by Exton's effective action, jerked out her pistol and was ready for work.

Thus taken unawares with the "drop" against them, one of them wounded and their leader down, three of the wretches fled, and the others would have followed their example if they had been allowed to.

Rattlesnake Tom was held by the persuasive force of Carl Klein's revolver, while Exton picked Dan Markell up by the collar and shook him like a dog.

"You infernal scoundrels!" roared the angry Englishman, "if we gave you what you deserve, we would string you both up to the nearest tree. To attack an unprotected woman as you have attacked this lady is the meanest thing that white men can do. But I will let you go with a warning. If you ever try to play such a game again, I will hunt you down and make dog's meat of you, as sure as I am a living man. Get out now, and be thankful that you are able to carry your worthless carcasses away from here!"

Without another word the baffled rascals sneaked away, and Exton and Klein caught their horses, which had been too tired to stray from where they were left.

When they had seen that no person in the cabin was seriously hurt, the Englishman escorted Victoria to her horse and assisted her to mount.

"I have told you, Miss Halsey," said he, "that you were running risks in going about alone, and I hope that you will be more careful hereafter."

"How did you happen to come here in time to help me?" she inquired.

"It was an accident that gave us the chance. A friend of ours happened to overhear those scoundrels plotting to capture you, and hard riding brought us here in time. You must now let us see you safe home."

"Part of the way, Mr. Exton. My mother must not know of this trouble, and I beg that you will say nothing about it to my brother Jack if you should meet him."

CHAPTER XV.

A CHANGE OF BASE.

AFTER his exciting and demoralizing adventure with the cattle-raiders, Aleck Sander spent most of his time at the Jonas Ranch, watching by night and resting in the daytime.

His continued vigilance, as he had supposed would be the case, was not rewarded by any discoveries.

Though tempting opportunities were offered to the thieves, they were in no hurry to take advantage of them, and the Jonas cattle that were in the neighborhood of the house grazed there undisturbed.

This was a monotonous and tiresome business for Smart Aleck, especially as he did not believe that there could be any useful outcome to it, and he was anxious to cultivate the acquaintance of Victoria Halsey, hoping to gain her favor by aiding her in the object that was nearest to her heart.

It may be added that the rewards for this unpleasant service were not largely attractive, as Simon Jonas, who was a very Jew in driving a bargain, had made the detective's pay depend considerably upon the actual capture of the cattle-thieves.

Thus Aleck Sander, who was neither able to let the business drop nor to attend to it to suit himself, was more or less worried and out of sorts.

He endeavored to impress his views upon the mind of his employer, but was reminded of the terms of his agreement, and was advised to continue the watching and waiting that had become so obnoxious to him.

Herman Jonas was almost ready to agree with the detective in his belief that one of the raiders must have perished, and that nothing more would be heard of them in that line of business, and Ralph Harkness inclined to the same opinion; but Simon Jonas stubbornly maintained the contrary.

They might have been scared off for a while,

he said; but nothing more serious than that had happened to them; and they might be relied on to attend strictly to business as soon as they could get rid of their scare or might suppose that the excitement had blown over.

It might not be his cattle on which they would renew operations; but they would be sure to "go for" somebody's cattle, and would not fail to pay attention to him in due course of time.

After a while the ranchman had a great triumph over Herman and Harkness, as well as over the incredulous detective.

One morning Sander was roused from his late slumber somewhat earlier than usual, and was hurried down-stairs to listen to an interesting piece of news which had just arrived, and which Simon Jonas repeated in repeating to him in the "I told you so" style.

Cattle-thieves had lately made a raid upon the property of Pete Jackson, who lived about fifteen miles from the Jonas Ranch.

They had, indeed, made two successful raids, and on the second occasion they had been seen by a cowboy, who had given a description of them which accorded as exactly as could be expected with that of the raiders at the Jonas Ranch.

There were two of them, a man and a woman, and they both wore broad sombreros, and their horses were a bay and a black.

"Now you see that I was right about that," triumphantly exclaimed the old man. "Those scamps have not quit the cattle-stealing business, and I am convinced that they are the Halsey rascals."

"You are clearly right on the first point," answered the detective, "but I am not so sure about the second."

"You are as obstinate as a mule, Sander."

"Who was the woman that went over the cliff?"

"Nobody."

"Whose was the black mare that we found dead at the foot of the cliff?"

"Can't say. There's more than one black mare in the world, and one woman may own two of them."

"I am a fool, then."

"That don't follow. I know you to be a smart man; but we are all liable to be mistaken, and a smart woman can fool the devil himself. I know those people better than you do, you see, and it is certain that they come of bad stock."

"If they are running off other men's cattle now, what becomes of the grudge that made them stick to your stock so fondly?"

"Oh, they are just playing off, waiting for a good chance to tackle me again. It may be that they have got so used to stealing cattle that they can't quit, and they are now picking up a few to keep their hand in. Anyhow, they are at it again, and the thing for you to do now is to follow them up wherever they are to be found, and catch them in the act if possible."

"That is what I want to do, no matter who they are, and I am tired enough of looking for them where they are not to be found."

It was settled that the detective should ride over to the Jackson Ranch that day, and should make that quarter his field of operations for the present.

"He had better stay there several days," said Ike Jonas, who was present and taking a lively interest in the news and the plan proposed. "I am as sure as father is that the Halsey Ranch is the home of those rascals. I talked last night with one of Pete Jackson's men who had caught sight of them, and he described them exactly to fit the two who have been making trouble about here. I have been looking into the business right carefully, and am willing to bet high that there is no girl in Oro Fino or anywhere about, except the Halsey girl, who is up to that sort of thing."

"Ike is right about that," observed the old man. "Pete Jackson will be glad to get your help, Mr. Sander, and you had better stay there as long as there is a chance to catch the thieves. If they should turn up in this neighborhood, we will let you know quick enough."

It must be admitted that this intelligence had a depressing effect upon Smart Aleck.

As Simon Jonas had been proved to be right in one of his conjectures, it was more than likely that he was right in the other.

If so, it must have been Victoria Halsey whom he had pursued, and she had sent her horse over the cliff while she cleverly remained behind, at the same time keeping a black mare at home to match the other in case of an emergency; but she must be a person of remarkable ability to plan and execute such a feat as that.

Not only had the detective been most egregiously fooled—supposing that conjecture to be correct—but it hurt him sorely to have the belief forced upon him again that the young lady whom he admired so highly was really a cattle-thief.

Though fresh doubts were raised, they had not yet become convictions, and, supposing the worst to be true, excuses might be made for Victoria, if her father had unjustly suffered, and if Simon Jonas had been largely instrumental in causing the death of Tom Halsey.

Before he left the Jonas Ranch some other

matter came to his knowledge, which caused him to incline more strongly than ever to champion the Halseys.

He was conversing with Simon Jonas just before his departure, when a man rode up who entered the house and pushed into the room abruptly.

This visitor was a rough person to look at, with an evil and unprepossessing countenance, and his dress and manner showed him to be decidedly down in the world.

Evidently the arrival of this person was by no means pleasing to Simon Jonas, who bent upon him a frown that did not abash the visitor in the least.

"What ill wind blows you here, Zeke Streen?" gruffly demanded the ranchman.

"Business, and I want to speak to you alone."

Aleck Sander took this as a hint that he was not wanted there just then, and went to an out-house where there were some saddlers' tools, with which he proceeded to mend his bridle.

While he was thus employed he heard voices near by, and recognized them as those of Simon Jonas and his visitor.

They not only came by the out-house, but stopped within a few paces of it, so that the detective could easily hear nearly every word they said.

"That's all now, Zeke," the ranchman was saying, "and you needn't come to me again."

"No?" inquired the other in a tone of incredulity.

"No, I say, and I mean what I say. You won't get another dollar out of me unless you work for it."

"It'll be queer if I don't, mighty queer. Ketch me workin' while I've got you to draw onto."

"I tell you, Zeke Streen, it can't go on any longer, and I won't stand it. I have done too much for you already, and you must not expect me to do any more."

"And I tell you, Si Jonas, jest what I do expect and mean to have. You've got to pay me from now on fifty dollars every month, reg'lar as clock-work, and if you miss a payment, you'll be sorry for it."

"What will make me sorry?"

"I will up and tell about the job you put up on Tom Halsey, to have him hung by the Vigilantes and git his land."

"What's the use of that, Zeke? It would neither do you any good nor do me any harm. Do you suppose that I could be worried now by an affair that happened so long ago? It is all dead and forgotten."

"That's these livin' who hain't forgot it, and who would be glad enough to know just how the game was played. They might worry you more'n a little."

"I am not afraid of them."

"Talk's cheap. I know you are. Cephas Strang and Nick Markell warn't afeard of them, neither. I'd do more'n that, Si Jonas. I'd have the hull thing published. I'd put the tell-in' whar it would do the most good."

"How could that hurt me? My position here is too solid to be shaken by any such jabber as that."

"Reckon it would pull you down a peg or so, anyhow. Take your choice, pard. It's all the same to me. Pay or peach—that's my platform."

"I will tell you what I will do, Zeke. I will keep on paying you for three months more, and then it will have to quit."

"All right. Jest keep on, and I'll tell you when to quit. So long, old man."

Aleck Sander looked through a crack of the out-house, and watched the visitor as he mounted his horse and rode away, and watched the ranchman as he walked back to the house, grumbling and muttering.

Then he got his own horse, and without another word to Simon Jonas, rode away toward the Jackson Ranch.

It is not too much to say that he was vastly pleased with what he had heard—that is to say, pleased because he had happened to overhear it—as it enabled him to justify himself in a measure for his unwillingness to push the pursuit of Jack Halsey and his sister to extremes.

If they were running off cattle, and in so doing they were working out a grudge against Simon Jonas, there was surely good ground for the grudge, though the manner of satisfying it might well be considered reprehensible.

He was well enough acquainted with the Jew ranchman to know that to touch his pocket was to strike him in the tenderest place.

As for the raids on the Jackson Ranch, perhaps Pete Jackson might have been one of the self-constituted Vigilantes, or there existed some other cause of enmity in that quarter.

In short, the detective had no trouble then in finding excuses for Victoria Halsey, presuming that she had taken up lawlessness as a trade.

It was yet more a matter of rejoicing to know that he had got hold of a clew to evidence that would probably re-establish the dead Tom Halsey and his living family in the good opinion of their fellow-men, and he might reasonably hope by means of that clew to win the favor of Victoria.

He would endeavor to persuade her to aban-

don her unlawful and dangerous pursuits, and at the same time would be able to offer her a better and safer means of visiting vengeance upon Simon Jonas.

The only points to be considered were how to locate Zeke Streen, and how to squeeze him so as to make him squeal.

CHAPTER XVI.

BARKING UP THE WRONG TREE.

ANYBODY who supposed that Dan Markell was going to abandon a cherished purpose because of such a slight rebuff as he had received at Sol Meek's cabin, was mistaken in the man.

In the first place, though one of his comrades had been wounded, he had got off with a whole skin.

The style in which he had been shaken and abused and compelled to sneak off, had not hurt his body, but only his feelings, which were not made of the tenderest imaginable material.

In the second place, he still believed that the best way to strike Jack Halsey a killing blow was through his sister, and he was convinced, in spite of his failure at Pinyon Pass, that the blow could be struck safely and surely.

The Pinyon Pass fiasco must surely have been caused by an accident, as Exton and his partner had merely happened there at an inconvenient time, and the chances were a thousand to one that nothing of the kind would happen again, and all that was necessary was to get an opportunity to make another attempt.

As Rattlesnake Tom agreed heartily with his employer in these feelings and conclusions, being thereunto stimulated by an abundance of whisky and a fair allowance of cash, and as they both set at work earnestly to more fully discover the habits of their proposed victim, it was not long before they hit upon what they deemed a sufficient opportunity.

They learned that she was in the habit of going out at night occasionally, and that, though she never seemed to go far, she always went on horseback.

On one of these occasions Dan believed that they might have followed and captured her, had it not been for the excessive caution of Rattlesnake Tom—largely induced by his too strenuous devotion to the whisky-flask.

"She's a sarpiint," declared the hero of the rattlesnake bites. "Not that I'm afraid of sarpiints; but this 'un has got a double row o' fangs, and nobody kin tell when or how it's a-goin' to strike. She's a tearer, Dan, for sart'in, wuss'n her brother Jack, and we'll hev to be keerful, as we want to make a sure thing of it this time."

So it was settled that the former gang should be started out, with the exception of the man who had been hurt at Pinyon Pass, and that they should make a regular campaign against the female enemy, by camping secretly in the vicinity of the Halsey Ranch, and prowling about until they could find an opportunity to intercept Victoria on one of her nocturnal jaunts.

The commissariat of the expedition was liberally supplied by Dan Markell, and of course it included an abundant allowance of whisky; but the leader was determined to regulate its consumption so that his followers should not be helpless when they were needed for action.

It goes without saying, however, that such an attempt was easier to make than to execute.

Everything went fairly well the first day out, and the young saloonist was able to keep his company under reasonable control; but the first night brought no fish to the net of the conspirators, and the next day found them restless and disposed to be insubordinate.

As they were not allowed to hunt, but were compelled to remain in hiding during the day, existence became a burden to them, and they longed for the fleshpots of Oro Fino—a longing which could only be appeased by a resort to the whisky flasks that had been brought from that land of plenty.

Dan Markell, being unable to help himself, relaxed the reins of discipline, and the gang, being also supplied with cards, succeeded in solacing themselves until they were fairly on the road to inebriation.

When night came, and the business of the expedition had to be attended to, it was necessary to call a halt of the whisky column, and the leader conceived a plan that seemed to him to be an admirable one.

As it was the intention of the party to prowl about in search of their expected victim, and as sober men would be needed for that duty and the more serious service that might ensue, it was ordered and agreed to that no whisky flasks should be carried by the three men who were going on patrol, but all the liquid subsistence should be left at the camp in charge of Rattlesnake Tom, and if any man felt that he needed a drink very badly he was to be permitted to go there and get it.

It was believed that this admirable arrangement would tend to fix in the minds of the men the location of the camp, which was to be the rallying point in case of the sighting of the prey.

The hero of the rattlesnake bites had proved himself worthy of this honor and trust, because he had thus far been remarkably abstinent, set-

ting his comrades an example which they would have done well to follow.

When the three had left him, however, he seemed to deem it his duty to make up for lost time, and proceeded to investigate the contents of the flasks with alacrity and diligence.

He was not allowed to enjoy his picnic alone, as first one and then another came in to get a taste of the seductive fluid, Dan Markell being the only one who was not suddenly seized by a consuming thirst.

Rattlesnake Tom sustained the character of a sober man by giving each a small allowance and sending them back to their duties; but after a little while they both came back together and imitated the example of Oliver Twist by demanding more.

As the custodian of the liquor was by that time in a pliable humor, the picnic became general, and the fluid was disappearing rapidly when Dan Markell came running into camp, excited by a discovery he had made.

"I've seen her!" exclaimed the leader. "She is coming this way, and is almost here. What do you fellers mean by sitting down and soaking that whisky when you ought to be attending to business?"

"We're all jest whar we are wanted, Cap," answered Rattlesnake Tom, "and you don't have to hunt up a man of us. What more do you want?"

"I want you to attend to business right now. She is coming this way, I tell you, and we must hide, two of us on each side of the trail, and when I jump out and stop her horse you must follow me and grab her."

Though three of the men were not just then in first rate condition for active service, they hastened to obey the instructions of their leader, and the four promptly concealed themselves on each side of the narrow and faint trail by which their victim was expected to arrive.

Shortly she came in sight, and it was clear that Dan's discovery was all he had claimed it to be.

She was mounted, and was riding her horse at a walk, as if in no hurry to get ahead, or not sure of her way in the darkness.

Her face was covered by a veil, which seemed to be an unnecessary precaution, as she was not likely to meet any person at that place and hour, and the use of the veil could not be justified by the prevalence of mosquitoes.

Slowly, silently and unsuspectingly she came on, and the ruffians could not have asked for a better chance to seize their prey.

Suddenly Dan Markell jumped up and grabbed her bridle-rein, and at the same moment Rattlesnake Tom and the other two rushed forth from their concealment and laid violent hands upon the horse and its rider.

Greatly to the surprise of those who were sober enough to be surprised, there was no attempt at resistance.

It had been expected that the girl would at once pull out her ready pistol and proceed to spread devastation among her assailants; but she did nothing of the kind.

A piercing shriek burst from her lips, and then she seemed to be paralyzed by fear.

"Jerk her down and shut off her jaw!" ordered Dan Markell, and she was rudely dragged from her horse, and a coat was thrown over her head, muffling her completely.

But her scream was not without its effect, and it seemed to be fated that somebody should always turn up, just at the most inopportune moment, to worry Dan Markell and spoil his best-laid plans.

Hardly had the victim been secured when rapid steps were heard close by, and the next moment Jack Halsey burst out from the timber and faced the gang.

His sudden arrival was not near as demoralizing to the ruffians as the apparition that followed him.

Close behind him, also on foot, and making quick time to the scene of action, was his sister, Victoria Halsey.

It was then the turn of Dan Markell and his men to become paralyzed.

The girl whom they believed they had captured and muffled and bound, was standing before them, free, unharmed, and glaring at them boldly and belligerently.

Who, then, was the captive?"

So stunned were the ruffians by this development that they were incapable of any action before they found themselves at the mercy of the new arrivals, Jack Halsey and his sister having at once cocked and leveled their revolvers.

"What are you doing here?" fiercely demanded Jack. "Release that woman, you scoundrels!"

Dan Markell stood irresolute; but Rattlesnake Tom, who was just muddled enough to make a fool of himself, pulled out a weapon and attempted to use it.

Jack Halsey's revolver cracked, and the wretch's pistol-hand dropped helplessly at his side, and he uttered a howl of pain.

"Better cool down," remarked Halsey. "I will shoot dead the next man who tries to use a gun."

A brief interval of silence and inaction was broken by the hasty arrival of another young

man, who was at once recognized by both parties as Ike Jonas.

His amazement at the scene was such that at first he was unable to speak or act, not knowing whether to help those who might be his friends, or to side with those who ought to be his foes, or to get out of the way and leave them to settle their difficulties; but he quickly got the use of his tongue.

Victoria Halsey had turned toward him at his approach, as if expecting an attack from that quarter; but his speech assured her that he was not connected with Markell and his gang.

"What's going on here?" he inquired. "What are you doing, Dan? Who is that woman down there?"

The answer came in smothered tones from the captive on the ground:

"Ikey, help me! Save me, Ikey!"

"It is my sister!" he exclaimed, and he ran to her, tore off the coat with which her head was muffled, and raised her to a sitting posture.

The others saw there a dark-haired, hook-nosed and sallow-faced young woman, who bore not the least resemblance to Victoria Halsey.

"What does it mean?" demanded Ike Jonas. "who has done this?"

"I will tell you what I know about it," answered Jack Halsey, as the ruffians did not appear to be inclined to make any explanations.

"My sister and I were walking in the woods when we heard a scream; and we ran here as fast as we could. We saw that these scoundrels had pulled a woman down from her horse, and I ordered them to release her. One of them pulled a pistol on me, and I blocked his game by smashing his head, and then you came."

"I am ever so much obliged to you," mumbled Ike. "But what does it mean? Why was this done?"

"I think I can tell you," remarked Victoria. "It is more than likely that these scamps mistook your sister for me, as I am sure that they were looking and watching for me. It is lucky for them that they made the mistake, as I knew what they were after, and they would have fared much worse if they had tackled the person they wanted to get. Just look at them, if you want to see a set of sheep-killing dogs that were caught in the act."

They were, indeed, utterly disgusted with themselves as they realized the mistake they had made, and not one of them could be induced to utter a word.

"I now give you notice, Dan Markell," continued the young lady—"you and your gang—that you had better keep out of my way hereafter, as I have a right to shoot you on sight, and I am quite likely to use all the rights I possess."

"Get out, now, you sneaking scoundrels!" ordered Jack Halsey. "Remember that we have the drop on you, and we mean to keep it. Mr. Jonas, your sister is able to ride, and you had better take her home."

The gang hastened to obey the order, and young Jonas put his sister on her horse and led her away, while Jack Halsey and Victoria started toward their home.

Ike's inquiries brought from Rebecca the confession that when she was attacked she was on her way to meet a young man who was a foreman on a neighboring ranch.

She begged her brother not to report her at home, and Ike promised to say nothing about the matter, but seriously advised her not to risk another such adventure.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHASING THE RAIDERS DOWN.

ALECK SANDER made at the Jackson Ranch what is frequently termed a water haul.

He spread his net carefully, but caught no fish, nor did he see the sign of one.

The cattle-thieves appeared to have ceased operations after his arrival, and, although he remained there three days, there was no renewal of their attempts upon Jackson's Ranch.

His disgust at his deplorable lack of success was intensified when the news was brought to him by a special messenger that the raiders had again transferred the scene of their labors to the Jonas Ranch, and had run off a nice bunch of cattle there.

He at once obeyed the order of his employer, and hastened back to the scene of his interesting and inexplicable adventure.

Simon Jonas's anger at the loss of his property was considerably tempered by his triumph in the result of his predictions.

"It has turned out just as I told you it would, Sander," said he. "The rascals have got over their scare, or believe that they have drawn off our attention, and so they have begun on my stock again."

Herman Jonas and Ralph Harkness admitted that the ranchman had diagnosed the case correctly, and Ike expressed a yet more decided opinion.

"I don't believe that there is any use in laying for them any more," said he, "and the only way to catch them is to go to the Halsey Ranch and arrest those two scoundrels."

Ike was the only person, however, who believed that it would be proper to take such a step without further and clearer proof.

Smart Aleck was puzzled by the manner in which the cattle-thieves evaded and dodged him, and had some suspicions of his own concerning their performances, at which he hinted to the ranchman when he saw him alone.

"I don't for a moment suppose, Mr. Jonas," said he, "that you would steal your own cattle or hire anybody else to steal them."

"Well, I should say that I wouldn't. What do you mean by that sort of talk?"

"I mean to say that it is mighty queer how those cattle-thieves manage to keep out of my way. When I came here they went to work on the Jackson Ranch, and when I got to Jackson's they slipped back here. It looks to me as if there might be somebody about your place who keeps them informed of our intentions and my movements."

"You are 'way off, Sander. There is nothing at all in that notion. Everybody about my place is faithful and straight, and I can vouch for every man here. You don't want to admit that I was right about it; but that's just what's the matter. They went to Jackson's to get our attention drawn off from my ranch, and now they have let into me again. All you have to do is to keep on watching for them and trying to catch them. I have not the least doubt about who they are, and all we want is positive proof."

Sander was not satisfied, and when he had watched two nights at the Jonas Ranch without discovering any further attempt there on the part of the raiders, his suspicions were strengthened.

It was true that they had not been heard of elsewhere; but there was something mysterious about the style in which they dodged him and suspended operations when he was present, and the detective decided upon a change of tactics.

The morning after his second fruitless vigil he informed Simon Jonas in the presence of his son and the foreman that he was going to give up the job and make no further effort to capture those cattle-thieves.

The ranchman, who was surprised and displeased at this statement, begged him to reconsider his determination, and reminded him of the terms of his employment.

"I mean to leave it alone for a while, anyhow," replied Sander. "I am doing no good here, and I have some important business that requires my attention. So I shall stay in Oro Fino to-night, and it may be three or four days before I get back here."

He rode away, but did not stay in Oro Fino that night.

At the usual hour for beginning his watch on the Jonas Ranch he was at his post, and he and his horse were as carefully concealed as ever, and he was, if possible, more wide-awake than ever.

What he wanted was to test the value of his suspicions concerning the complicity with the cattle-thieves of some person on Simon Jonas's place.

If those suspicions were correct, the raiders might be expected to renew their operations shortly after his supposed absence was reported to them.

The result proved that he had been right in trusting to the old adage, "When the cat's away, the mice will play."

It lacked half an hour of midnight—very early for that style of business—when he discovered that the cattle-thieves were at work.

They did not begin the task as secretly and quietly as on the former occasion when he had caught them at it, but went about it more bunglingly and carelessly, as if they felt that they were sure of being left alone to pursue their operations as they pleased.

When they started off with the bunch they had gathered up, and the detective got a clear view of them, he perceived that they were the same whom he had previously pursued—a man and a woman, mounted on a bay horse and a black.

He would have been justified, in view of their notorious performances, in shooting them down then and there, and he was near enough to them to do so; but he felt an invincible repugnance to that course.

As the woman might be Victoria Halsey, it would of course be impossible for him to kill her, and it would be equally out of the question to shoot her brother.

Besides, he was not on duty for Simon Jonas that night, and on a private scout of his own he had a right to regulate his actions to suit himself.

So he determined to follow them, as he wanted to know positively and without a doubt who they were and where they had come from, and as he was convinced that they would not be able to play the cliff game on him again, or to deceive him in any other way.

Naturally he wished to follow them quietly, so that they would not be aware of his pursuit; but this proved to be impossible.

The night was quite dark, and he was obliged to keep within hearing distance so as not to lose sight of them, and before long he was both heard and seen by them.

Then, as on the previous occasion, they gave themselves no more trouble about the cattle, but

put spurs to their horses and galloped away, with the detective in close pursuit.

In the darkness and amid the intricacies of the hills which they shortly reached, he nearly lost them more than once; but, by pushing his horse hard, he managed to keep them in hearing, if not in sight, and was convinced after a while that they did not mean to separate.

At least, they had no intention of trying the cliff trick again, as they both turned to the right where the woman and the man had previously parted, and kept on steadily in that direction.

When they got into better ground, the detective found himself decidedly at a disadvantage, as they easily proved the superiority of their mounts by drawing away from him so rapidly that he began to fear that he would be distanced.

He was then, also, too far behind them to do any successful shooting if he had desired to, and nothing was left him but to follow out his original plan and continue the pursuit to the best of his ability.

He urged his horse to its best endeavors for the sake of keeping them in sight, and got on fairly until they struck a road, into which they turned, and he followed them.

It was evident to him that they were going direct to the Halsey Ranch, and he felt, if not easier in his mind, more certain of the ultimate result of the pursuit.

Though they were still increasing their distance, they were then not far from the Halsey Ranch, and the road was so straight and clear that the darkness did not prevent him from keeping track of them.

The Halsey house came in sight, dimly perceived in the distance, and he saw the two fugitives draw up in front of it.

The next moment his horse suddenly stumbled and fell, and he fell with the horse.

When he rose and looked ahead, they had both disappeared.

As it was not possible that they could have got out of his sight by keeping straight on and following the road, the natural supposition was that they had stopped at the Halsey house and were to be found there.

He rode forward as rapidly as his horse could carry him until he was near the house, and then dismounted and hitched the tired animal, proposing to continue his explorations and inquiries on foot.

The house was dark and quiet—nothing to be seen or heard there; but that was to be expected, and it would not be worth while to knock or to hail, as the two raiders would of course take time to put themselves in proper trim before permitting them to see him, and he had good reason to believe that they were capable of making a "lightning change."

There was one other means of getting further proof, and that was by looking for the horses and noticing their condition, and with that view he approached the grass lot carefully.

There were the two horses—the bay and the black, and no other—quiet enough, and showing no evidence of excitement or weariness.

He tried to get close to them, so that he might make a particular examination of them; but they were unaccustomed to strangers, and kept at such a respectful distance as to deprive him of the chance he sought.

It would of course have been quite possible for the fugitive by quick work to turn their horses into the lot, hide the saddles and bridles in some convenient place, and conceal themselves in the house before he could get there.

As he could find no further evidence against them, he returned to his horses, mounted, and slowly rode away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PROVING AN ALIBI.

THOUGH convinced that Simon Jonas would even have paid money for information of that night's adventure, Aleck Sander did not seek that gentleman, and was not a bit crazy to give points to anybody concerning the discovery he had made.

Besides, there was just the remotest possibility that he might be mistaken.

He had been sure of the identity of the raiders on the former occasion; but circumstances had shown him that he could not believe the evidence of his senses, and even in this case plain and direct evidence might be somehow controverted.

There was one puzzling fact which he could not pretend to understand, and which must be made the subject of future investigation.

Whoever the raiders might be, it was then evident that they had a confederate in Simon Jonas's household, who kept them informed of the detective's movements and the plans that were laid to capture them.

It was unlikely that the Halseys should have such a confederate there, and yet that seemed to be quite as likely as anything else in the tangled skein of affairs.

As the case stood, he could scarcely have the slightest doubt that Jack Halsey and his sister were the cattle thieves he had at first supposed them to be, and the thought saddened him great-

ly, as his admiration of Victoria had been increasing daily and hourly.

Supposing the worst to be proven against them, he was resolved that it should not be he who would bring them to justice, and it should not be he who would give Simon Jonas a chance to boast of his better judgment and plume himself upon his predictions.

Professional pride would prevent that, if there were no stronger motive.

So Smart Aleck settled it in his mind that he would visit Victoria Halsey, and would have an interview with her, either alone or in the presence of her brother, when he would tell her what he knew and had reason to suspect, and would do his best to persuade her to quit the nefarious pursuits in which she was engaged.

If this effort should prove a failure, it would be no fault of his, as he would make it fairly and faithfully.

This was what he did. He went on to Oro Fino, where he got some needed rest, and the next day rode out to the Halsey Ranch, getting there in the afternoon.

He had to confess as he approached the house that he did not know how to open his subject and express gently but firmly what he wanted to say.

The style of remarks which he had been meditating on the way appeared to be not at all the right sort of thing when he was confronted by the bright and smiling face of Victoria Halsey.

Could he accuse that lady of being a cattle-thief?

She received him with an impressive cordiality, and ushered him into a room where her mother and Jack were seated.

When Mrs. Halsey rose to leave the room, her daughter detained her.

"Don't go, ma," entreated the young lady. "Mr. Sander is a particular friend of mine, and I want you to know him better. He doesn't mean any harm to us, though he is a detective. Quite the contrary, I assure you."

This was a warm enough welcome, but the niceness of that speech interfered seriously with Smart Aleck's object, making it more difficult for him to say anything harsh.

After a while, however, he found his opening, and took advantage of it.

"Where have you been for this ever so long, Mr. Sander?" demanded Victoria. "It seems an age since I have seen you, and I have really wanted to meet you."

"I was quite near you last night," answered the detective—"that is, supposing you to have been at home—as I passed by this house."

"And you did not call in? That was shockingly mean of you. How did it happen?"

"I followed two cattle-thieves to this place last night."

"Of course they went by, then, and you kept on after them. Strange that we did not hear the racket."

"That was not the way of it. They stopped here."

"Stopped here? That is strange, indeed! Who could they have been?"

"One of them was a man, and the other was a woman," replied the detective, with as severe a tone and look as he could assume. "One rode a bay horse and the other a black."

"Why, Jack, that sounds as if the rascals might have been you and me! Did we go out cattle-stealing last night?"

The assurance of this young woman struck Aleck Sander as being the most amazing he had ever witnessed.

"I don't remember taking a hand in any such diversion," answered Jack.

"Did you miss us two last night, ma?" inquired Victoria.

"Of course I did not. This is some kind of a joke, I suppose, and I am not fond of jokes, particularly that kind of jokes. So I will leave you."

Mrs. Halsey got up and sailed out of the room, apparently much offended.

"So it can't have been Jack and I who were out stealing cattle," observed Victoria, "unless we did it in our sleep, and this morning there was nothing the matter with our horses, the bay and the black."

It seemed to the detective that those people were brazening out the thing remarkably well; but he would pin the fact upon them yet.

"What became of your cattle-thieves, Mr. Sander?" asked Victoria.

"I tell you that they did not pass this house, and if you do not know what became of them, I do not."

"That settles it, then. It is a clear case of ignorance all around."

"Miss Halsey," said the detective, who was really getting "riled" by the coolness of the pair, "this is no joking matter. It is too serious a business to be treated lightly. I tell you again that I followed two cattle-thieves to this place last night, that they were a man and a woman, that one rode a bay horse and the other a black, and that they exactly answered the description of you and your brother. I caught them stealing cattle on Simon Jonas's Ranch, chased them, made them leave the cattle, and followed them here. As you told your mother,

I do not mean you any harm, but the contrary, and I have come here to-day to ask you to tell me the truth, and to give you some good advice."

Victoria braced herself up, physically as well as mentally.

"We are always glad to get good advice," said she, "and you shall have the truth from us—that is, if we are able to tell it. So it is your belief, Mr. Sander, that Jack and I were the cattle-thieves you followed here last night."

"I—I did not say—"

"You might as well say so now, as that is what you mean, and it is best to speak plainly. Let us look into the matter. Can you tell me at what hour you caught those persons stealing cattle on the Jonas Ranch?"

"About half-past eleven."

"Then we can easily prove what the lawyers call a sufficient *alibi*. We had a visitor last night—Mr. Horace Exton, of the Hole in the Ground Mine. Perhaps you know him."

"I have met him."

"He was with us here until about eleven o'clock. Ma said that he had stayed very late, and I looked at the clock. It was then ten minutes after eleven by our time. I don't believe that we could have got to the Jonas Ranch in twenty minutes, to say nothing of getting ready and saddling the horses."

"Indeed you could not, and the *alibi* seems to be established."

"You ought not to take my word for it, Mr. Sander, as I am an interested party, and you need not. You can easily see Mr. Exton if you care to, and get his testimony. He is a gentleman, and I don't believe he would lie."

"Nor do I believe that you would lie, Miss Halsey. I will see Mr. Exton, but for your satisfaction, rather than my own, and I want to apologize to you for my suspicions."

"You need not do so. Your suspicions were just and correct. Appearances were strongly against us, and if I had not had the *alibi* to fall back on, I would hardly have been able to hold up my head."

"Of course you will admit that there is a mystery to solve. Who can the cattle-thieves have been?"

"That is the question, and I believe that you can be relied on to settle it in time. There is no doubt that I have enemies about here, and you know that Jack has. Nothing would be too mean for some of them to do to injure us, and it is quite likely that the persons you followed have been personating us, stealing cattle and trying to put the blame on Jack and me. If you find them again, I hope you will do something sharp and decisive—catch them or kill them."

"What can have become of them? Where did they go to after they got here?"

"They must have turned off into the timber opposite the house," observed Jack. "I will go and look about for sign, though there are so many horse-tracks in the road and out of it, that I don't suppose I can find anything that will tell the story."

When Jack Halsey had gone out, the detective, whose mind was greatly relieved, hastened to open the second branch of his subject.

"That cattle-stealing business," he said, "was not the only thing that brought me here. I have been anxious to see you concerning the matter of which we spoke some time ago. I then offered you my services, and they were not declined, though you were in no great hurry to accept them."

"I have wanted to meet you, Mr. Sander," answered Victoria: "but one thing and another has prevented me from even attempting to do so. I was truly thankful for your offer, and have been trying to think how it might be made available, but have seen no opening as yet."

"You may leave me to find the opening, and I believe that with your assistance I may be able to do something. What you wish, as I understand, is to clear your father's memory. I have not forgotten that, and I have not been idle. I lately struck a clew that may be of some use. There is a man named Zeke Streen—"

"Zeke Streen?" eagerly interrupted Victoria. "There was a man named Zeke Streen, and if he is living and can be made to talk, your clew may be very valuable. He is the man of whom Sol Meek told me."

"Who is Sol Meek, and what did he tell you?" She related her conversation with the invalid at his cabin, without telling of the misfortune that had befallen her there.

"I suppose that was all the old man could tell you," observed Sander, "and it would not be worth while for me to see him, as it is probable that I know more about the matter than he does. I know enough to lead me to believe that Zeke Streen would clear up the difficulty if he could be got hold of and made to talk. I have seen him, but do not know where he is to be found. I believe, however, that he is somewhere in the neighborhood of Oro Fino, and that I will light on him before long. When I do, I will find a way to make him talk."

"If you succeed in doing that," said Victoria, "you will prove yourself a true friend to us, and will deserve more than our thanks."

Jack Halsey came in and reported that he had

found tracks leading into the timber across the road, but was unable to arrive at any definite conclusion concerning them.

CHAPTER XIX.

TROUBLE IN ORO FINO.

VICTORIA detailed to Jack and her mother the latter part of her interview with Aleck Sander, and they were greatly interested in the recital, Mrs. Halsey agreeing that the detective was not, after all, as bad as she had painted him, and Jack becoming excited over the discovery of Zeke Streen.

There was no reason, he said, why he should not assist Sander in his search for Zeke Streen, or start a search of his own for that much-desired individual.

He had kept at home long enough after the shooting of Nick Markell, and was in no further danger of being molested by the law, and the excitement over that event had entirely died away.

He believed that there was no person whom he had especial cause to fear, and that it was not worth while for him to try to avoid his enemies, as he would be as safe in any place which he would be likely to visit as if he were on the ranch.

So one fine day Mr. Jack Halsey rode into Oro Fino again.

Though peaceably inclined, he was prepared for war, and two revolvers plainly displayed, with a knife and a belt of cartridges, showed that it was his intention to preserve the peace, even if it cost him a fight.

It may be said for Jack, though the fact may not hitherto have been suspected, that he was usually a quiet and unpretentious young fellow, not hot-headed by nature, and by no means disposed to provoke a difficulty or rush into one, but on general principles as nice a young man as the borders of civilization might be expected to produce.

On this occasion it happened that almost the entire outfit of cowboys from the Jonas Ranch were in town.

Simon Jonas, worried by his recent losses, another raid occurring as soon as Aleck Sander had gone on a furlough, had sent away fully three-fourths of his cattle—part of them being sold and the remainder transferred to a distant ranch.

Consequently he had given notice of discharge to more than half of his herders, as he was not the man to keep them on expense a day longer than their services were needed.

In telling them of the dismissals, he had informed them by implication, if not in plain words, that the authors of his losses were Jack Halsey and his sister.

This did not seem at all unreasonable to the men, as more than one of them had seen the two raiders when Flaherty was shot, and all had heard the accounts of those who had been seen on the Jackson Ranch, both descriptions fitting very closely to the persons whom Simon Jonas accused.

Though the Jew ranchman was not beloved by his employees, his money was as good as any other man's, and the cowboys not only grieved at losses which deprived them of further pay, but were bitterly opposed to proceedings that tended to demoralize the important industry of cattle-raising.

Therefore, when Jack Halsey entered Oro Fino that day, it was like coming into a hostile community.

The Jonas contingent of cowboys had got into town before he did, and had immediately begun to distribute their money among the bar-rooms, filling themselves up as a preliminary to the extensive orgies of the night.

By the time of Jack's arrival several of them had increased their inherent viciousness by libations of fighting whisky until they were ripe for a row.

When it became known among them that one of the pair of supposed cattle-thieves was in Oro Fino, they began to sympathize more strongly than ever with the wrongs of their employer, and to meditate vengeance upon the rascal who had helped to rob them, at least for a time, of their means of living and buying whisky.

It is characteristic of the average cowboy that when he gets into a town and secures a sufficient supply of tarantula juice, he not only fancies that he can "run" that town, but believes that it is his right and duty to do so.

No matter how mild and peaceable he may be by nature, this sentiment is pretty sure to crop out and find expression in some way.

If he is left alone he may "run the town" without creating too much hard feeling; but if he is interfered with in his harmless amusements, his fighting blood may get up, and unpleasant results are likely to ensue.

As whisky was made to be drank, so towns are made to be "run."

Thus it was that when the contingent from the Jonas Ranch took it into their heads to execute justice upon Jack Halsey as a flagrant offender, they had no thought of appealing to the law for aid.

Their notion naturally was that they could pick up the rascal and treat him just as they

might have done if they had caught him red-handed on "the range."

Herman Jonas was in town that day, though he had not come with the cowboys, as he had an idea that he was considerably above their level, and he became aware of the intentions that were springing up wantonly in their minds, but made no attempt to check the growth, as he believed that sort of thing to be acceptable to his father.

Ralph Harkness was not there. If he had been, his influence might have been efficiently exerted in the other direction, as he was a cautious and conservative man, reasonably fair-minded as well as firm, and on that account was respected as well as feared by those who served under him.

The only wonder was that he had remained so long in the employment of Simon Jonas; but the Jew ranchman's pay was always sure, and he had sense enough to want to keep a man who managed well for him.

Another person who was aware of what was going on, and was glad of it, was Dan Markell.

It is probable that he had been more incensed against Jack Halsey by his defeat on the occasion of the Rebecca Jonas episode than by the violent death of his father; but he had not been able to see his way clear to get even with his enemy.

A personal collision was not to be thought of, as young Halsey was known to be a quick and sure shot, and Dan, whose nerves were enfeebled by dissipation, was no match for him in any sort of a fair fight.

The man who had "got away with" Nick Markell, after a pistol had been pulled on him, would have no difficulty in attending to the case of Dan.

Therefore, it was necessary to work some underhand scheme, or to overpower the obnoxious young man by force of numbers.

When the feeling that existed among the Jonas contingent of cowboys became known to the young saloonist, he seized upon it at once as a means of helping him to his vengeance.

He called his gang together, including Rattlesnake Tom, who, though not then in fighting condition, could be used with the others in working up what may be styled a bar-room public sentiment against the comparatively friendless Jack Halsey.

They gave the cowboys to understand that they would be well supported in whatever measures they might adopt to rid the country of the alleged cattle-thief, and there was an abundance of free whisky in the Markell saloon for all who were opposed to him.

There was another man who took notice of these proceedings and of the feeling which had been aroused, and which was so conspicuously displayed that it could not miss his attention.

That man was Aleck Sander, who soon became convinced that the movement was a dangerous one, threatening death to Jack Halsey if it should go on, and threatening a serious disturbance in Oro Fino if it should be opposed.

Accordingly, he sought his friend, Marshal Hobbs, to whom he explained the situation of affairs.

Major Hobbs needed little explanation, as he also had noticed the feeling that was being worked up, and he needed not a bit of urging to do his duty, which he believed to be the preservation of order in Oro Fino at all hazards and under all circumstances.

"My eyes are open, Aleck, and so are my ears," remarked the marshal. "Fighting whisky is getting its work in, and there are plenty of men here who are ripe for a row. The trouble is that there is a durned sight more of it than we see on the surface."

"What is under the surface?"

"The fact is, my friend, that I am not as popular here as you suppose I am. There is considerable of a public sentiment against me in Oro Fino and outside."

"You have made a splendid officer, major."

"Thank you; but that's just what's the matter. I have run this town strictly on law and order principles for some time—indeed, I may be said to have ruled it with an iron hand—and the roughs and rustlers are naturally down on me. The only way I have been able to keep things level has been by watching my chances and striking quick and hard. I am as solid as the everlasting hills with those who call themselves the solid citizens; but you know what they are when a pinch comes, and at the best they are slow to get their fighting blood up. The other crowd have been hungry to get a chance at me, and if a general row begins they will pitch in like a pack of wolves. That makes my position uncertain and uneasy."

"Of course you don't mean to let Jack Halsey be murdered by any pack of wolves."

"Well, you are right about that. I don't mean to let him or any other man be slaughtered here in cold blood as long as I am alive to prevent it. But I may not be alive to prevent it. If a row begins, you will be sure to find me in the front rank, and there are plenty who would be glad to make a mark of me. So, you see, for my own sake as well as for the sake of a town, I would greatly prefer that the row should not begin."

"So would I; but how is it to be hindered?"

"There is one thing that can be done. If the excuse for beginning a row which has now cropped out could be taken away, that would be something. It might not be enough to stop the fuss that has been started; but we ought to take all the chances for peace that can be got hold of."

"And Jack Halsey is the excuse," suggested the detective.

"Exactly so. If he could be quietly got out of town, certain people would be deprived of a strong temptation, and it is just possible that the pot might bubble without boiling over."

"Very well. I will attend to that matter and endeavor to get him safely and quietly out of the way."

"That will be a great favor to me, Aleck, and while you are at it, I will go about and see what men I can depend on, and warn them to be ready for trouble."

CHAPTER XX.

THE COMBAT DEEPENS.

SMART ALECK felt, in view of his recent experience at the Small Hopes Ranch, that Jack Halsey might not object to taking advice from him concerning the emergency that seemed about to arise, and yet he was of the opinion that his relations to Simon Jonas placed him in rather a delicate position.

As he was considering the matter, a fortunate circumstance occurred.

He saw Horace Exton and his partner riding into town, and hastened to meet them as they dismounted.

He rapidly sketched an outline of the growing excitement in Oro Fino, the basis of the disturbance being the intention of the Jonas contingent of cowboys to fasten upon Jack Halsey and execute judgment on him as a cattle-thief.

"What's that?" exclaimed the Englishman. "Jack Halsey a cattle-thief? They might as well say that his sister is a cattle-thief."

"That is what they do say," suggested the detective.

"Look here, Mr. Sander; I want you to be careful what you say to me. I have been a good deal worried lately, and am liable to get excited."

"I am careful what I say; but, if you have heard nothing of this, I must tell it to you plainly, as it is important that you should understand it clearly and know how to act."

"Tell it to me plainly, then."

"I have no doubt that Simon Jonas is responsible for the belief that some people have, that Jack Halsey and his sister have been running off the cattle which he has lost lately, and I am obliged to say that the charge he makes is not without a little coloring of truth."

"Are you going to tell me that those two are cattle-thieves?"

"I am not, because I have looked into the matter a little deeper than Jonas has; but I must confess that at one time I came near to sharing his opinion, and the night before last I might have been driven quite to that belief, if it had not been for you."

"What did I have to do with it?" demanded Exton.

"The thieves who have been running off cattle from the Jonas Ranch, as well as doing a little work in the same line at Pete Jackson's Ranch, have had descriptions given of them that very closely fitted Jack Halsey and his sister. They were a man and a woman, and one rode a bay horse, and the other a black, the woman being a splendid rider."

"Mr. Sander, are you giving me the absolute facts?"

"I am giving you not only what I have heard, but what I have seen, and you will soon know what you have to do with it. Night before last I found two persons who answered to those descriptions driving off some of the Jonas cattle, and I nearly killed my horse in following them. Where do you suppose I followed them to?"

"I am no guesser. Tell me at once, and put me out of my misery."

"I followed them to the Halsey Ranch and to the Halsey house."

"Great Caesar's ghost! That looks—"

"Of course it looks very suspicious; but appearances are often deceitful. I did not say that they went into the house, though I supposed at the time that they had done so, as I was sure that they did not pass it. Having satisfied myself on that point, and believing at the time that they must have gone in there, I went away, but returned the next day to give the suspected persons a chance to explain the matter, and they did explain it."

"How?"

"They proved an *alibi* by you. You were at the Halsey house that night. At what hour did you leave it?"

"About eleven o'clock. Yes, I remember that I looked at my watch, and it was just eleven."

"So Miss Halsey said, and that settled the *alibi*, as it was half-past eleven when I struck the cattle-thieves at the Jonas Ranch. The lady's word was enough for me; but she asked me to refer to you, and I promised to do so."

"You must have had a high opinion of Miss

Halsey," suggested Exton, "to take her word against such a suspicious set of circumstances."

"I surely did believe her; but that has nothing to do with what I want to get at. I have been telling a long story here, and time is precious; but I had to explain things, so that you could understand that Simon Jonas had some show of reason for his accusations, and consequently the men to whom he has been repeating them have a color of right in wanting to hound down Jack Halsey. I have been talking over the matter with Major Hobbs, and it is his opinion that the trouble is really very serious."

"I will stand by Jack Halsey," declared the Englishman, "as long as there is breath in my body, and I am sure that my partner will be with me."

Carl Klein asserted his intention of standing by Exton as long as he was able to stand.

"And so will I," said Aleck Sander, "and so will the marshal; but his opinion is entitled to be considered, and he says that the best thing to do is to remove the provocation for a row by getting Jack Halsey quietly out of the town. I promised him that I would attend to that; but you have come, and I will turn the job over to you if you will take it, as I am in the employ of Simon Jonas, and perhaps I had better not mix in the business in that way."

"All right. I will hunt up Jack and try to get him out of town; but he is a very stubborn fellow, and if he takes it into his head that he don't want to go, a team of mules would not start him."

Jack Halsey had been quietly going about town, making purchases and attending to other matters of business for the Small Hopes Ranch.

He had not as yet entered any of the saloons, the headquarters of news and excitement, and consequently was unaware of the talk that was afloat concerning him, and the preparations that were being made for his extermination.

As he stepped out of a store he was met by Exton and Klein, who at once addressed themselves to the task which they had promised to perform.

The Englishman was quite correct when he said that Jack was a very stubborn fellow, and hinted that it was going to be no easy matter to get him out of town.

When the young ranchman was given to understand what was going on in Oro Fino, and was informed of the desire of his friends that he should quietly slip out of town, he "flared up" instantly.

"Now, Exton, that won't do at all," he declared. "I know that you mean well, and have no doubt that Aleck Sander does, while Major Hobbs of course wants to hold up his end with as little labor as possible; but you really ought not to ask me to play the part of a coward—to turn tail and run like a coyote just because a lot of blatherskites are barking on my trail."

"I wish there were none but blatherskites mixed up in that barking," answered Exton; "but the solemn truth is, Jack, that those men from Jonas's will soon be crazy drunk, and then they will start in to play the wild. Of course you will be singled out as the victim, and what can you and your few friends do against such a mob?"

"I don't want to get any friends into trouble; but I am such a poor hand at running that I should not know how to begin. I have few enough friends here, anyhow, and I think it would be best to let me go alone and take my chances."

"You have some good friends, Jack, though they may be few. Here are two of them, and Aleck Sander is another, and Major Hobbs is bound to stand by you, and of course he has men to back him. But we all want to avoid a row if possible, and we have agreed that it will be the best for all concerned if you will quietly slip out of town and deprive the roughs of that excuse. It is for the sake of your friends that we ask you to do so, quite as much as for your own sake."

Jack's response was suspended by the arrival of three of the hostile cowboys, who were at the stage of inebriation which is styled "pretty full"—not drunk enough to be desperately vicious, but sufficiently to be meanly malicious.

They came meandering up the street, and stopped and stared insolently at the young ranchman.

"Hello, young feller!" saluted the foremost man, "how's the cattle-thievin' business?"

Jack made no answer, but folded his arms and returned the stare with interest.

"You've gone to the length o' your tether," continued the cowboy. "You've stole cattle from Si Jonas's ranch until he's had to ship off his stock and git rid of his men, and now there's goin' to be an end put to it, and to you, too."

"If you want to pick a quarrel with me," calmly replied the young ranchman, "you may have all the quarreling to yourself, and I don't mean to fight unless I am forced to it; but I give you fair warning that if you or any of your crowd try to fool with me, there'll be coffin for some."

The man made a significant motion at his throat with his hand.

"We ain't quite ready for you yet; but your time'll come quick enough," he remarked, as he walked away with his comrades.

"You see how it is, Exton," said Jack Halsey. "They've got it in for me, and have given me notice. If I should sneak off now, it would be nothing less than running away. Everybody would call me a coward, and everybody would want a kick at me."

"It is just because of what you have seen and heard that we urge you to leave town. You now understand how serious the matter is, and Major Hobbs advises you to go."

"I think it would be better for Major Hobbs if I should stay. I believe that I see further into this business than you do, Exton, and it looks to me as if the roughs want to strike at the marshal through me. If there has got to be a fight for the control of this town, it might as well come now as later on, and I could be of some use to him by staying here, and at the same time save my reputation."

"It is because he don't want them to strike at him that he advises you to leave. Your reputation is in no danger. You just go because you have no business that keeps you here. As I said, it is for the sake of your friends that you will slip off."

"For the sake of my friends, then, I will see what I can do. But my horse is right here, and when I ride down the street those men will be sure to go for me."

"You need not bother about your horse. Mine is at the other end of the town. We will quietly walk down there, and you can mount my horse and ride away."

"Well, that is sneaking. Come on, then, and we will see if we can make the connection."

Fate had determined that they were not to make the connection.

They had not got half-way to the spot where Exton had left his horse, when the trouble came to a head, and the row began.

From Dan Markell's saloon issued a number of the Jonas cowboys, their blood fired with fighting whisky, and they were speedily joined by others who had been loitering about the neighborhood.

Down the street they came, whooping and yelling like madmen, and gathering speed as they approached Jack Halsey and his friends.

If there could have been any doubt about their purpose, it was made apparent by their leader, a stalwart and wild-eyed cowboy, who carried a lariat.

"There he is! Come on, boys, and we'll hang the durned cattle-thief!"

CHAPTER XXI.

"WAR TO THE DEATH!"

THE cowboy's hail proved that he and his followers meant business, and it was necessary for the Halsey party to face the music.

However loth they may have been to do this, their movements showed no indecision.

Indeed, there was nothing left for them to do but to run, and to run would not have been to escape, even if they had felt disposed to make a venture of that sort.

At once, and as if instinctively, they backed up against the blank wall of a building near by, drew their revolvers, and prepared for sharp and desperate work.

It was woful odds that they were then and there called upon to face—three men against at least twenty, and the ranks of the twenty were being continually enlarged, if not recruited, by accessions from miscellaneous citizens, none of whom joined the three who were "treed" against the wall.

One person joined the three—a man who was warmly welcomed, though without a word, as his value at such a crisis was fully appreciated.

That man was Aleck Sander, who had been watching from a little distance the negotiations between Horace Exton and Jack Halsey, and who hastened to them as soon as he perceived that the trouble was about to come to a head.

His arrival had not the least effect upon the opposing party, who came forward as they had started, wild with liquor, and inflamed by a wolfish desire for blood.

They were not to be allowed to continue their course without objection.

"Hold on there!" roared Exton. "We know what you are after, and if you mean business, so do we, and you had better stop and think of what you are doing."

"Not while our heads are hot," answered the man with the lasso. "The chap you have there is a known cattle-thief, and we are here to see that justice is done to him once for all. Come on, boys!"

"Hold!"—it was Smart Aleck who shouted this time. "Some of you may know me, and those who do may know that I mean business. I tell you that this man is not a cattle-thief. I have looked into the matter, and I tell you what I know to be the truth. If you want to give him a fair trial, well and good; but you will run into a wolf-trap if you try to work any other scheme."

"Will somebody punch a hole in that gas-bag?" remarked the big cowboy. "We didn't come here to listen to anybody's mouth-organ. We know that cuss to be a cattle-thief, and we mean to have him. If those three men try to

stop us, so much the wuss fur them. Ain't that so, boys?"

A general yell of approval testified to the disposition of the mob, and a sudden rush was made, which was as suddenly stopped.

Through the crowd burst the burly form of Major Hobbs, followed by half a dozen armed and determined men, who at once ranged themselves in front of the threatened party, as if they had been organized and trained for that special purpose, and the stentorian voice of the marshal rung loud and clear above the noise of the throng.

"I command the peace, and I've got the law to back me. The first man who fires a shot will have me to deal with. Before you start a fuss here you had better think of where it will end. I am bound to keep the peace, if half the town dies with its boots on!"

The arrival of the law and order contingent made a decided difference in the situation.

Though few in number, they were so well armed and disciplined that it would be dangerous to meddle with them, and when they were added to the four resolute men who had faced the mob, they were a truly formidable force.

But the cowboys who held the front of the mob, feeling that they had plenty of backing, and being in no mood to brook interference with their amusements, though they had been checked, were not to be repulsed.

"We're arter that cattle-thief, Jack Halsey," said the leader, "and we mean to git him if we have to tear up your durned old town."

"I arrest this man!" shouted Hobbs as he laid his heavy hand on Jack Halsey's shoulder. "He is my prisoner."

Not understanding this move, the young ranchman turned savagely upon the official.

"That's all right, my boy," whispered Sander. "It is the best and safest way."

Jack cooled down, but did not change his grip upon his cocked revolver.

"I am going to take him to jail," said the marshal, "and it won't be safe for anybody to interfere with me. Close up, men!"

He started away, his six men forming a body-guard about the prisoner, and he and Exton brought up the rear, while Aleck Sander and Carl Klein led the line of march.

They were not to be permitted to go off as easily as they might wish to.

Fortunately for them and their prisoner, the jail was but a little distance from the spot where the disturbance started, and that was a strong point in their favor.

It was not overlooked, however, by the mob, who perceived that they must secure their victim before he reached a place of comparative safety.

The parley with Exton, and the subsequent parley with Major Hobbs, had not been time entirely lost to the roughs, as their force had been strengthened and their purpose intensified by the arrival of a number of men who "meant business" fully as much as the cowboys did.

Among them were Dan Markell and his party, with a contingent of those who had been longing for an opportunity to "down" Major Hobbs and change the style of rule in Oro Fino.

The former circulated among the crowd, supplying fighting fluid from their flasks, and promising an abundant supply of free whisky at the Markell saloon when the deed should be done.

The latter, eager as wolves, and anxious to seize their opportunity, pressed forward to the front, and seemed disposed to take the lead of the disturbance out of the hands of the cowboys.

A howl of rage and execration burst from the throng as Jack Halsey and his guard started off, and another rush was made, which was met and repelled by the firm front shown by Hobbs and Exton and the others.

"Give me that rope!" shouted one of the anti-Hobbs men to the leader of the cowboys. "It's no use with you. Give it to me, and we'll string the cuss up in a jiffy."

"Teach yer gran'mother to set hens!" growled the other. "Better not fool with me if you don't want to git hurt. Watch and see me snake the galoot out o' thar quicker'n you could wring a duck's neck."

The speaker threw his lasso viciously, and began to haul in swiftly as the noose settled over Jack Halsey's head.

This was the first belligerent act, and it brought an immediate response.

Major Hobbs, who had been keenly watching the man's motions, fired at him instantly with fatal effect.

As the big cowboy staggered back, shot through the head, the rope dropped from his nerveless hands, and the young ranchman threw off the noose.

By this time the jail had been reached, and Aleck Sander, who had the key, opened it quickly.

Before Jack Halsey could guess what was about to happen, the detective seized him by the shoulder, whirled him around, and closed and locked the door, putting the key in his pocket.

He and the others had no thought of following the prisoner, but remained outside to face the howling mob, who were excited to the pitch of frenzy by the shooting of their leader and the sudden disappearance of their prey.

In point of fact, the jail was not defensible except from the outside.

It was a primitive affair, only a stout log building, erected in the earlier days of Oro Fino, and of late the inhabitants had been so busily engaged in putting up saloons and other places of business that they had no time to think of the need of a better jail.

A garrison in such a place would be like a rat in a hole, safe for a while, but with no opportunity worth speaking of to resist the efforts of a mob outside to batter down the door or burn the building, as the two small windows, set high in the walls, were not available for firing purposes.

Though good enough to keep a prisoner from getting out, it was not worth much to keep a mob from getting in.

Thus it was that Jack Halsey's guards were obliged to defend him from the outside of the prison, and their chance seemed to be rather desperate.

They had succeeded in getting him out of the way and into a place of at least temporary safety, but in so doing had not soothed or conciliated the mob.

The fall of the big cowboy had startled and staggered them for a moment, and Major Hobbs took advantage of that brief opportunity to raise his voice in warning again.

"In the name of the law I command the peace, and I give you fair warning that if you make a fight here, it will be war to the death!"

His answer was a bullet that grazed his cheek, and the mob made a rush to overwhelm the handful of men in front of the jail.

The odds were not as severe as they appeared to be.

Though the crowd was a big one, all the men who composed it were not Jonas's cowboys, nor were they all sympathizers with the anti-Hobbs movement or with Dan Markell.

In fact, it contained many non-combatants, who were necessarily in the way of those who meant serious business, though they might serve to stop bullets as well as any of the others.

The men who really wanted to force the fighting were numerous enough, but they labored under the further disadvantage of a lack of cohesion and compactness of organization, while their opponents knew just what they had to do, and were prepared to act as one man.

None of these considerations had any weight with the frenzied mob, who precipitated themselves like an avalanche upon the resolute few.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE REIGN OF BLOOD.

THEN began the reign of blood in Oro Fino.

As soon as the shot was fired that grazed the cheek of Major Hobbs, he and his six trained men opened the game, and Aleck Sander, with Exton and Klein, at once followed suit.

There were but one or two rifles in the crowd, in the hands of outsiders, and their opponents did not hold one; so the fighting was bound to be with revolvers at close range.

Since Harvey Hobbs had been Marshal of Oro Fino, it had been his way to quell a disturbance by instantaneous and merciless action, thus "knocking out" the disturbers before they could fairly get their work in, and impressing upon them and others a wholesome fear of himself and his methods.

On this occasion, therefore, when he gave the order to fire, his followers knew that meant quick and effective work, and they did not disappoint his expectations.

As rapidly as those ten revolvers could be cocked, they were fired with deadly aim, so that every shot counted.

The result was quite similar to that of the discharge of a Gatling gun.

The small but resolute and disciplined band "had the drop" on their adversaries, and used it with fatal effect.

It had naturally been the desire of their leader to pick out as his special victims the men who were making war upon him personally; but the rush was so tumultuous that there was little chance for any discrimination.

Cowboys and citizens fell aside before the first volley, and there was no pause in that murderous fire—no chance for the astonished and stricken mob to recover.

As the front ranks dropped, those in the rear pressed forward to take their places as in regular battle, and plenty of shots were fired from that side; but the firing was desultory and without precision.

There was plenty of viciousness, however, and men who had been sorely wounded, struggled to their feet, or raised themselves upon their arms to send a revengeful shot at their foes, who were compelled to fire alike upon those who were up and those who were down.

The steady, rapid and continuous firing had the effect which Major Hobbs intended it should have, and the mob began to break.

When the weakening was apparent, he ordered his men to cease firing, and they availed themselves of the opportunity to refill their revolvers from their cartridge belts; but the mob, who

still largely outnumbered their antagonists and were constantly receiving accessions, were encouraged by this interval to fresh efforts.

They did not attempt another rush, but spread out and sought to surround the defenders of the jail as far as they could be surrounded, popping at them at longer ranges.

Just then the marshal had a reinforcement which arrived when it was needed.

While he was getting his men together, in preparation for the disturbance which was more than probable, he had seen some of the "solid citizens" who were chiefly interested in the maintenance of law and order, and with a few brief and forcible words had impressed upon them the fact that if they desired to save their property and prevent the rule of the town from passing into the hands of the worst elements, it would be necessary for them to act with him on that occasion energetically and without delay.

In fact, it was well understood in Oro Fino that Major Hobbs was obnoxious to the roughs not so much on account of his personality, as because he was the official representative of the law and order party.

Accordingly several good and determined men had armed themselves, closed their places of business, and hastened to the relief of the marshal as soon as the firing began.

When this contingent had joined him, Hobbs found himself in much better condition for settling the difficulty, and he at once perceived that he must again take the aggressive and fight for all he was worth.

So he instantly formed his party in military style, and ordered a charge, which was so well conducted and vigorously made, that the mob scattered and fled, the non-combatants setting an example in getting out of the way which was speedily followed by the fighters.

After driving them well and punishing them severely, the marshal returned with his men to the jail, where there was a sad and shocking sight.

Nothing like it had ever before been known in Oro Fino.

There had been from time to time plenty of single fights and pretty extensive engagements; but they had all been mere combats and skirmishes as compared with the pitched battle in front of the jail.

This was really war, and the street in front of the log building looked like a battle-field after the battle.

It was actually sickening to look at the dead and dying and wounded men who had been left there by the retreating mob, and the victors had also suffered severely.

One of the marshal's six had been killed, and another was mortally wounded; Carl Klein had been disabled by two bullets, Exton and Sander were more or less scarred; and the leader had received a bad flesh wound in the left arm, which he had not noticed until then.

A consultation with the citizens resulted in the decision that the jail should be used as a hospital.

A couple of men who had been locked up there for some slight offenses were turned loose, and the wounded of both sides were carried in and made as comfortable as possible, and a physician was sent for.

Jack Halsey, who had of course heard the firing outside, and knew that men were killing each other there, in efforts to destroy and defend him, had been raging inside like a caged tiger, wild to get out and take part in the fight.

When the wounded men were brought in, he "nailed" Major Hobbs and Aleck Sander, and demanded that he should be let out and allowed to bear his share of the burden.

"It is not fair," he claimed, "that you should be fighting for me, while I am safe and doing nothing. I could be of some use out there, and there is no sense in keeping me housed up."

"The fight is not about you, my boy," answered the marshal as Smart Aleck was bandaging his wounded arm. "It was your business that started it, to be sure, but there is a great deal more than that of it now, and the truth is that you would do us more harm than good if you were out."

"How so?"

"You were the excuse that those roughs and rustlers made for beginning the row. While we can say that you are a prisoner, awaiting trial on any charges they may bring against you, we take that excuse away from them. If we should turn you loose, they would say that we were merely taking your part, and what I may call the moral effect of that sort of thing would be worth considerable to them. I know that you are a good fighter, Halsey, and I would be glad to have your help; but you are only one man, and so you would do us more harm than good outside."

Greatly as he longed to get out and help his friends, the young ranchman was compelled to remain where he was and make himself useful in taking care of the wounded.

Though the first battle of the campaign had resulted favorably to the law and order men, they had good reason to believe that the war was not over.

It was near night when the first victory was won, and several important considerations

pressed themselves upon the attention of Major Hobbs and his party.

As the hours of darkness would bring accessions to the rough element, with a largely increased consumption of whisky, and consequently a greater tendency to disorder, the first thing necessary was to consolidate and organize the law-abiding citizens, so as to guard the town and present a firm front to the enemies of order.

This duty was confided to some of the citizens who had joined the marshal, and they hastened to perform it, the jail being fixed upon as the general rendezvous and headquarters of the forces.

The next thing in order was the arrangement of a commissary department, so that the men on duty could be fed without leaving their posts.

Men were found to put this machinery in motion, as well as to attend to the supply of ammunition and to add a number of rifles to the revolvers that were carried.

As the jail had been, and probably would be again, the objective point of the mob of roughs, it was deemed proper to fortify the approach to it, so that its defenders should not be forced to fight entirely in the open.

This was accompanied by building a barricade, or breastwork, of barrels and boxes and odds and ends of timber.

These matters having been attended to without any further disturbance or interruption, Major Hobbs felt himself at liberty and strong enough to take other measures connected with the safety of the town and the preservation of order.

The "solid citizens" came to his assistance more largely and with greater alacrity than he had expected them to, and he had good reason to hope that with the force then at his command he would be able to "down" the rough element quite effectually.

Again, as it was his nature to do, he proceeded to take the aggressive.

One danger to be feared was that of particular or promiscuous attacks upon obnoxious citizens, and the destruction of their property.

Instead of flinging themselves against a force that was organized and prepared to meet them, the mob might assail weak points here and there, with a view to private grudges or general plunder, or with the hope of dividing the force of their foes and diverting them from the objective point of attack.

To meet this contingency it was decided that the town must be watched and guarded, and a strong patrolling force was sent out after dark, armed with rifles, near enough to support each other in case of need, and with orders to report immediately at headquarters any demonstration in any direction on the part of the enemy.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A FRIENDLY FIRE.

THE mob, in the mean time, leaving their wounded friends to the care of their foes, had retired to fill their ranks with men, and to fill their skins with whisky.

Whisky had been the controlling force that began the war, and whisky was to be the sustaining force to carry on the campaign.

Though Jack Halsey had not yet been "strung up," Dan Markell made good his offer of free drinks to those who had taken part in the battle and were still able to drink.

He had gone into the fight, as he expressed it, red-eyed, bound to "make a spoon or spoil a horn," and, as he was himself pretty well muddled, he issued orders for the distribution of "red-eye" that made his barkeepers stare.

Consequently his saloon was the headquarters of the revolutionists, and thither flocked not only his own adherents, but the Jonas cowboys and their friends, with all who were interested in overturning the Harvey Hobbs dynasty.

These men, and especially those last named, realized the fact that the contest which they had begun was a very serious matter; but they also believed that with the odds of numbers and enthusiasm on their side they would be pretty sure to win if they should stick together and fight for all they were worth.

A final victory would not only give them control of the town of Oro Fino, but would enable them to defray the cost of the campaign at the expense of those who had most bitterly opposed them—in other words, to gain unlimited loot.

The cowboy contingent were of the same opinion, and had the additional incentive of desiring to avenge the death of their leader and to execute their judgment upon Jack Halsey.

It was only necessary to secure a good organization and proper plans, and the anti-Hobbs portion of the malcontents undertook to attend to that part of the business.

It may be stated as a general rule, however, that an organization which is mainly cemented by whisky is not likely to be an entire success.

Whisky is very effective as a stimulant, but as a bond of union it is not thoroughly reliable.

The leaders of the mob found it useful as a recruiting agent.

As the people came in from the surrounding

country for a few hours of business or revelry—especially the revelry—the emissaries of the mob captured numerous cowboys and others, whom a sufficient supply of whisky made ripe for a row, and who were willing enough to worry the constituted authorities.

The other side secured a few ranchmen; but their recruits from the outside were not near as numerous as those of their adversaries.

As the hours of night wore on, and the effects of free whisky became more manifest, a plan of campaign was agreed upon by the leaders of the three combined forces.

It was settled that a portion of the mob should go and "clean out" Sam Bartoco's "Miner's Hope," which was the oldest saloon in town, and was obnoxious to the disorderly element as being the favorite resort of Major Hobbs and his adherents.

Another section was to work its way around to the rear of the jail, and endeavor to burn the building by making a bonfire against it, regardless of the fact that their wounded friends as well as their foes were in there.

While these movements were in operation the main body was to attack the position in front of the jail, with the expectation that the attention of the enemy would be so distracted that a successful assault might be made.

The first movement was made against the "Miner's Hope," and there the malcontents had cause to rejoice in their achievements.

The inmates, glad to escape with their lives, scattered out as quickly as they could, some of them being severely hustled in getting away, and the mob proceeded to wreck the saloon.

As they hated to see good liquor wasted, they naturally endeavored to save as much of it as they could by pouring it down their throats, and this portion of the campaign was somewhat demoralizing to the campaigners.

News of this strike was immediately carried to the headquarters of the other side, and Major Hobbs lost no time in meeting the attack.

Rightly judging the intentions of his adversaries, he sent only a small portion of his force to that point, under the command of Aleck Sander, with instructions to use no half-measures in dealing with the insurrection, but to strike quick and hard.

The detective and his command hastened up the street, swelling their forces by picking up the patrolmen on the way, and dashed into the "Miner's Hope," where the rioters, who had not thought of placing a guard outside, were smashing things at their own sweet will.

Obedying the instructions of the marshal, Sander and his men opened fire as they entered the building, without any challenge or warning, and the effect of this unexpected attack was to throw the wreckers into such a state of consternation that a sudden stampede ensued.

He did not give them time to rally or gather head, but pursued them as soon as they broke, driving the most of them down the street toward the main body.

The movement of the second detachment of the mob was made more quietly.

They sneaked around to the rear of the jail, from which quarter no attack had been expected by its defenders, and some of them piled combustibles against the building, while their comrades stood ready to protect them from interference.

Though the men engaged in this diversion were not more sober than the rest of the mob, they realized the fact that owing to their weakness in point of numbers, they must find safety in prudence, and their work was done with so little noise that it failed to attract the attention of those in front of the jail, who were occupied just then by a serious movement on the part of the main body of the mob.

But the incendiaries were not to be allowed to complete their task without interruption.

Hardly had the bonfire begun to blaze up, when a big man burst in among them with an Indian yell that was loud and wild enough to wake the dead.

With a vigorous kick he scattered the pile of combustibles, and then, swinging a heavy rifle by the muzzle, dashed at the men who had built it.

This energetic action was accompanied by a series of yells which indicated the presence of a force to back him.

"Come on, boys! Here they are! Pitch into the gallbusted sneaks! Burn the jail, will ye, dodburn ye!"

The force to which he was appealing existed only in his imagination, as he was entirely alone; but there was help at hand for him.

Aleck Sander, coming that way with a portion of his men in pursuit of some fugitive rioters, comprehended the situation at a glance, and swooped down upon the scene of action.

Before the incendiaries had recovered from their astonishment at the big man's demonstration, the detective and his band attacked them in the rear.

They were then speedily disposed of, and the fire which they had started was effectually extinguished.

This left the mob that had gathered in front of the jail the only organized body operating against the partisans of law and order, and the

task to which it had addressed itself proved to be by no means an easy one.

Though the scattered roughs who had not become too badly demoralized for further active employment had gathered there, those who favored the other side had collected at the marshal's headquarters, prepared to carry on the war to the bitter end.

The latter force, though still somewhat smaller than the other, was soberer, more concentrated and better led, and had the further advantage of the fortification which Major Hobbs had erected in true military style.

Hobbs and his friends, therefore, found themselves easily able to hold their position and prevent their adversaries from doing them serious damage; but that was unfortunately not the only point which they were compelled to consider.

While they were cooped up there at the jail, the rest of the town was practically at the mercy of the mob, detachments from which might go here and there and raid such establishments as were obnoxious to them or offered a promise of plunder.

This was a danger which could not be overlooked, and occasional shots and yells from the upper end of the street told of rioting that must be quelled at any cost.

It again became necessary to assume the aggressive and force the fighting until the insurrection should be quite ended.

A hurried consultation of the leaders of the force at the jail resulted in the decision that a charge should be made upon the mob, who must be scattered and driven until the friends of law and order could obtain entire possession of the town.

Just as the men were massed for that purpose, and the order to charge was about to be given, the startling cry of fire was raised.

It came from the upper end of the street, and was instantly emphasized by a bright flame that shot up in that direction, made fearfully visible by the darkness of the night.

This caused an immediate stampede.

The crowd outside the barricade broke and ran toward the fire, and the men whom they had been assailing hastened to follow them.

Friends and foes speedily became inextricably mixed up, each man striving to be first at the scene of the new excitement.

Leaving a few reliable men at the jail in charge of Aleck Sander, Major Hobbs hurried off to the fire with the rest.

The discovery was quickly made that the conflagration threatened to be a serious one.

Some half-drunken rioters, allured by the prospect of easy plunder in the midst of the general commotion, had entered a store to help themselves to what they wanted, and had been stoutly resisted by the stubborn proprietor and a couple of clerks.

In the struggle that ensued, a lamp was overturned upon a mass of inflammable material, which blazed up so quickly that it was beyond the power of those present to extinguish the flames, and the alarm was instantly given.

It was soon evident that the store in which the fire had started was bound to go, and that the utmost exertions would be required to save the adjoining buildings and the rest of the town.

There was not a man who refused to give his aid to this object.

The roughs vied with the "solid citizens" in their efforts to conquer the conflagration, and all other animosities were lost sight of in strenuous endeavors against the fiery foe.

It seemed to be the general verdict of good men and bad that the right thing to do was to save the town first, and fight for it afterward.

The struggle was severe and desperate; but the united forces finally prevailed against the fire, and it was completely extinguished after much damage had been done.

By that time the population of Oro Fino, resident and transient, was so utterly exhausted, that nothing but peace and rest was possible.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AFTER THE STORM.

A LITTLE explanation will be in place concerning the big man who had so opportunely interrupted the incendiaries behind the jail.

By the evening train, just at the close of the first battle, there had arrived in Oro Fino a man whose appearance and ways were calculated to attract attention.

He was a middle-aged man, tall and of large frame, the greater part of his face covered with a heavy black beard, and his brows shaded by a broad slouched hat.

There was nothing peculiar about his attire, which was that of the average ranchman; but he had an extensive armament for a peaceful traveler, carrying no less than two visible revolvers and a heavy repeating rifle.

In his air and his gait was the style of a man who considers himself monarch of all he surveys, and who is not disposed to brook the interference of any created being.

At the hotel he registered his name as:

"T. TEXAS,
Texas."

"What does the T. stand for?" inquired the curious clerk.

"Texas," answered the stranger, and thereafter he was known to those who had occasion to address him as Mr. Texas.

Mr. Texas quickly discovered that something unusual was transpiring in Oro Fino, which was anything but a quiet town just then, and he did not balk his inclination when it led him forth to investigate the disturbance.

The scene of greatest excitement within his easy reach at that moment was Dan Markell's saloon, and thither he made his way, carrying his armament.

Nothing could be easier than to make the investigation he had proposed to himself, as he found there plenty of men filled with whisky and information which they were willing to unload—the information, not the whisky—upon any inquiring stranger.

He was also speedily pounced upon by the recruiting officers of the mob, who saw in him a valuable fighting man whom they would be glad to enlist on their side, and who were liberal with liquor while presenting to him the merits of their case.

He accepted the drinks with the placid assurance of a man who confides in the absorbent ability of his flesh, but was reticent concerning his intentions, preferring to hear all that was said and to gather in all the points that were available.

Thus he soon got a history of the cause of the troubles, with a description of the present situation, according to the views of the insurrectionists, and from these statements was able to form his own ideas and draw his own conclusions.

He also became possessed of the plans of the night campaign—indeed, no concealment was made of them—and was specially interested in the project of burning the jail.

"Won't that be a little rough?" he mildly inquired. "Is thar nobody in thar but that young cattle-thief?"

"We can't help it if thar is," answered his informant.

"Seems to me that I heard that some wounded men had been carried in thar—some of your friends among 'em."

"I reckon we can git them out. If not, they'll have to take the chances. Business is business."

When the detachment started to burn the jail, Mr. Texas was not far behind them.

When they were getting their work in to their satisfaction, he also got his work in, with the useful result which has been detailed.

At the close of that skirmish he was accosted by Aleck Sander, who had perceived and appreciated the value of his interference.

"I am glad to meet you and thank you for what you have done," said the detective. "I don't remember seeing you about here before. Are you a stranger in Oro Fino?"

"Just came to town on the train awhile ago," answered Mr. Texas.

"You have not missed any points since you got in, I should say. You have done some very good work here, such as we could not have expected from a stranger."

"Well, the fact is that I've got a sort of a personal interest in this business."

"Indeed! How is that?"

"I take it that you are a friend to the young chap in thar who is accused of stealin' cattle?"

"I am a friend to him in this affair, at least."

"That's what I allowed. I happen to be an uncle of his—his father's brother. My name is Abe Halsey, and I'm from Texas."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Halsey. You could not have got in here at a better time. My name is Aleck Sander. And now, as things seem to be safe here, suppose we go around in front and see what we can do to help our friends there."

Abe Halsey followed the detective to the front of the jail, where he was made acquainted with Major Hobbs and Horace Exton, and placed himself and his armament at the service of the marshal.

When the fire and the general stampede occurred, he remained at the jail as one of the guard under the command of Aleck Sander, and after a while, when the danger seemed to have passed, the detective allowed him to go in and have an interview with his nephew.

After the fire it became so evident that there was to be no more fighting that night, that Major Hobbs notified all his friends they might go to rest or employ themselves as they pleased, and he retained only a few men to patrol the town until morning.

Abe Halsey, however, with Aleck Sander and Horace Exton, preferred to transfer themselves to the inside of the jail, where they took such rest as they could get on the board floor, and held themselves in readiness for a possible alarm.

The morning found Oro Fino quiet; but the quiet was like that of death.

If a tornado had wrecked the town, the effect could scarcely have been more stupefying.

The friends of law and order, as the result proved, had gained a signal victory, but at a terrible cost in the destruction of life and property.

Major Hobbs showed excellent judgment as well as energy in making prompt endeavors to

secure the fruits of the victory that had been so hardly won.

Early in the morning, when the just and unjust alike were sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, he went around town with his body-guard, and ordered that all the saloons should be closed and kept closed.

As he had sufficient strength at the time to cause the enforcement of the order, it was obeyed, and the effect upon Oro Fino was marvelous, nothing of the kind having ever before happened since the camp was located.

It was not at all like a Sabbath, Sunday being always the busiest and liveliest day in the saloons and other centers of excitement; but it was as if a pall had been thrown over the town, which had for the time ceased to exist.

When the wearied belligerents of the day and night before awoke from their slumbers and crawled out into the light of day, there was not visible the least desire on the part of anybody to renew the fight.

Both sides had learned a lesson from the conflagration which rifles and revolvers had not succeeded in teaching them; but that was not the only thing or the main thing that kept them quiet.

The supply of whisky had been suddenly and severely shut off, and that, as Major Hobbs observed, "took the spunk out of them."

It might have been more correct to say that it prevented them from securing a fresh supply of spunk, as the roughs were nearly out of the article when they awoke to the realities of existence, and depended on the saloons to revive their drooping spirits and brace up their shattered systems.

A few flasks and bottles were procured and passed around; but these afforded only a very slight relief to the thirsty, and drinking outside of the excitement of the saloons did not begin to fill the measure of their requirements.

As the morning wore on, and it became evident that there was to be no more fighting, that the situation had been accepted, and that the vanquished were content to remain in subjection, the marshal gradually relaxed his restriction, and the saloons were allowed to open their doors, with the proviso that those in which order was not fully maintained would again be promptly closed.

He arrested a few of the men who had been prominent in opposing his rule, and shut them up in the jail to await an inquiry into their acts; but to the rank and file of the roughs, residents and outsiders, he tacitly issued a proclamation of amnesty by taking no notice of them whatever.

It was decided that Jack Halsey, having been arrested under an accusation of cattle-stealing, should be held to meet that charge if any person would come forward to press it, and that he should have a trial, or at least an examination, to deprive those who had sought his life of any excuse for another disturbance.

To this end a notice was sent to Simon Jonas, requesting him to appear and make the charge, and to bring to Oro Fino any person by whose evidence he might support it.

It was not deemed advisable to make any further move in the matter during the day succeeding the great struggle, as it would be better to wait until the excitement should subside, and Oro Fino should settle down to its regular business, so that none of those interested should be able to say that they had been made the victims of a "brace game."

As soon as the tide had turned in Oro Fino in favor of the side of law and order, and there seemed to be no reasonable doubt of Jack Halsey's safety, Horace Exton had sent a messenger to Small Hopes Ranch, to carry the news of the recent excitement and danger.

In the morning, believing that his presence at the ranch would be reassuring to the family, if not necessary, Abe Halsey procured a horse and rode out there.

Lemon Squeezer, who had been left in charge of the cabin at the Hole in the Ground, had got news of the disturbance at Oro Fino, and, hoping to be able to render some assistance to his patrons, had hastened thither, arriving at an early hour in the morning.

The Italian had a remarkable faculty for happening to be about where matters of interest were occurring, for overhearing conversations, and for picking up bits of news.

This faculty had been of use quite recently, and on this occasion it came into play again, giving him an important piece of intelligence.

As he had discovered that Dan Markell and Rattlesnake Tom were bitter enemies of Exton, or of Exton's friends, he made it his business to watch them closely, following them like a shadow, and creeping up and listening to every bit of their talk that he could possibly catch.

After a while he missed Markell, and therefore he paid assiduous attention to Rattlesnake Tom, hoping that he would thus be able to learn what had become of the other.

He did finally learn what had become of Dan, and what he heard was so interesting that he hastened to Exton to whom he repeated it eagerly.

The Englishman gleaned from Lemon Squeezer's excited and broken talk the impor-

tant fact that Dan Markell, believing that it would be useless for him to stay in Oro Fino and plot for the destruction of his enemy, had decided to take advantage of the presence there of Jack Halsey and his friends, and make a short cut to his revenge by a raid upon Small Hopes Ranch.

Accordingly he had increased his gang, and had left Oro Fino for that purpose.

Exton immediately informed Aleck Sander of this plot, and they took a few men by permission of Major Hobbs, and rode off in hot haste.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RAID ON THE RANCH.

ABE HALSEY'S unexpected arrival brought him a warm welcome at Small Hopes Ranch.

It was a long time since he had seen the wife and children of his dead brother, and his presence was doubly grateful to them at that time, as he was the bearer of news from Jack, the messenger sent by Exton not having succeeded in quieting the apprehensions of the ladies.

Indeed, Victoria had been with difficulty restrained by her mother from arming herself, mounting her black mare, and visiting the scene of action.

Uncle Abe's account was satisfactory, persuading them that Jack was at least in no immediate danger, and they quieted down with the intention of awaiting events patiently.

The big man from Texas wanted an explanation of the entire family affairs, and got as full a history of recent events as Victoria and her mother chose to give him, including the killing of Nick Markell and the subsequent attempts to capture Victoria.

Uncle Abe did not talk much, except to put questions, but proved himself a good listener, and it is to be presumed that he "did a heap of thinking."

The conclusion which he finally expressed in words was quite pertinent and reasonable.

"It seems to me," he observed, "that as those chaps are so durned bitter ag'inst you folks, right now would be a good time for 'em to strike so's to hurt."

"What do you mean?" inquired Victoria.

"I mean that while your brother is away, and they have got a partic'lar mad fit on, some of them will be more than likely, seeing that the other end of the game has been spoiled, to run out here and strike at Jack Halsey's home. That's just what I would do if I was as mean as they seem to be."

"That may happen, Uncle Abe, and we ought to have thought of it sooner. But we are generally pretty well able to take care of ourselves."

"Self-confidence is well enough in its way, my girl, but it needs backing. What have you got to back it up? How many men are there on the ranch?"

This inquiry developed the fact that the home force was very small—only Dave Wisner and one other man.

"Only three of us," observed Abe Halsey. "That's a small crowd to buck against such a gang as might come out here from Oro Fino."

"Four of us, uncle," suggested Victoria.

"Counting you as one, hey? Well, I make no doubt that you've got plenty of grit, and many a man wouldn't bear counting as well as you. But we are a small crowd, anyhow, and we must get together and keep together, so as to make the most of ourselves if trouble should come here."

Dave Wisner and the other man, Jack Wildey, were brought into the house, informed of Uncle Abe's apprehensions, and requested to prepare their artillery for use in case of an attack.

Abe Halsey speedily made his arrangements for defense, which were few and simple.

"As I fought through the war," said he, "I ought to know something about this sort of business, and I will make the best lay-out I can."

It was of course impossible to defend the ell of the building, which must be left at the mercy of the expected assailants in case they should see fit to attack it, and all the resources of the establishment were devoted to the care of the front part of the house.

All available pieces of furniture and bedding were used for barricading the windows and the back door, leaving suitable places for sight and for firing, until the officer in command was sure that he had done all that was possible in that line.

Then he sent out Dave Wisner as a picket in front of the house, and Jack Wildey as a picket in the rear, while he took his station at a window, and Victoria quietly assisted her mother in preparing supper for the party.

It was then near dark, and the defenders of the ranch joined in the hope that if there was to be an attack, it might be made while there was a little daylight left.

As they wished, so it happened.

Hardly had the pickets been sent out, when Dave Wisner hastily returned to inform the commander that he had heard the noise of horses coming up the road.

Both the pickets were called into the house, and Abe Halsey took his stand in the open front door to await the approach of the possible enemy.

Soon they came in sight, and a formidable

party they were, as the man from Texas was able to count eight, and believed that there were ten of them.

As they came within yelling range the stentorian voice of Abe Halsey sounded a challenge.

"Halt, there! Who are you?"

There was a halt, but no answer.

The men in the road dismounted, hitched their horses, and advanced somewhat leisurely.

"Keep your distance!" yelled Abe Halsey.

"If you come near this house, we'll fire on you!"

A shot was the answer, and the bullet struck so close to the speaker's head, that he retreated and closed the door.

"Those folks mean business, whoever they are," he observed, as Victoria came in with her rifle, and hastened to a window where she could get a view of the road.

"They are the wretches we have been looking for," said the young lady. "I recognize Dan Markell among them."

That they did mean business was made apparent by their movements; which, although not hasty, were energetic enough.

Part of them remained in the front of the house, sheltering themselves behind trees at the other side of the road, gradually advancing to nearer cover, and firing occasional shots at openings in the windows.

The others made their way to the sides and the rear, as if looking for the most easily assailable point of the building, the movements of all being characterized by caution rather than by speed.

It was to be presumed that they had become aware of the fact that their arrival had been expected, and that preparations had been made to meet them, and, as they could not judge what force was in the house, they deemed it best to go slow and feel their way.

The rear of the house was the weak point of the defense, as there was nothing to prevent the assailants from entering the ell, and when they should be once established there, it would be comparatively an easy matter to work their way into the main building.

But it would be impossible for the four men—counting Victoria as one—to cover all the weak points, and they could only use vigilance and take their adversaries where they happened to find them.

Mrs. Halsey was in the room adjoining the ell, and Victoria went in there, leaving the three men to guard the rest of the house and answer the occasional shots from the outside.

A scream from the old lady drew Uncle Abe's attention to that quarter, and the scream was followed by a shot.

He hastened in there, drawing his revolver as he went.

Some of the assailants, gaining access to the ell, had burst in the door that had been fastened and partly barricaded.

Victoria had shot down one of them, and another was forcing his way in.

Abe Halsey made short work of that man, grabbed another whom he found in the opening, and jerked him into the room.

Just then a volley and a chorus of yells told of an attack upon the front, and he rushed thither, dragging his captive, who was no other than Dan Markell.

"Look to the rear!" he shouted to Dave Wisner, "I will take care of the front."

Pulling open the front door, the big man jerked up Dan Markell, who was nearly senseless from the rough treatment he had received, and held the young saloonist in front of him with his stout left hand, while with the right he fired shot after shot from his revolver at the advancing gang.

"Here he is!" shouted the Texan. "Shoot him as much as you want to! He is yours, do-burn you! Do what you please with him!"

This novel style of defense caused a sudden cessation of the attack, and then a lively cheer was heard, and Aleck Sander and his comrades galloped up and scattered the rest of the crew.

"Are you all right here?" demanded Exton, as he rode up to the house.

"All right," answered Uncle Abe, "and nobody hurt, I believe."

"What have you got there?"

"A cuss that I captured inside, and I've been using him for a breastwork. Let's see who he is. By thunder! he's dead!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

OUT ON BAIL.

THE disastrous failure of Dan Markell's attack upon Small Hopes Ranch left the Halseys in complete security, as their friends believed, and the latter were at liberty to turn their attention to Jack's affairs.

So they spent the night succeeding that engagement at the Halsey house, and the next morning returned to Oro Fino.

It had been decided by the leaders of the law and order party there that the charges so freely made, against Jack Halsey, being serious in themselves, and also having been the starting point of the terrible collision, should be legally and fully investigated.

Therefore it was settled that the young man should that day be brought before a justice of

the peace in Oro Fino, all the evidence bearing upon the case should be heard, and he should be either discharged as innocent, or held to await a regular trial, the machinery of law being then well established in the district.

The investigation did not excite near as much public interest as it might have done if it had taken place before the recent cataclysm.

In view of the distressing and tragical events that had convulsed the town, a mere charge of cattle-stealing, though ordinarily calculated to arouse attention, was hardly worth speaking of.

Dan Markell was no longer there to incite his gang of roughs to action, and the Jonas cowboys, having failed so signally in their first attempt, had lost interest in the affair.

There were others, however, besides the prisoner and his immediate friends, who were deeply interested in the investigation, and foremost among them was Simon Jonas, who came to town with Ralph Harkness and the men on his ranch who had seen the cattle-thieves.

He had also caused the attendance of the men on Pete Jackson's ranch who had had a somewhat similar experience, hoping to prove the guilt of Jack Halsey, and believing that he would be able to do so.

Though the attendance at the investigation was comparatively slim, it was large enough to cause Judge Burt, as the justice of the peace was named, to adjourn the hearing from his office to a larger room, and thither the prisoner was brought, and there gathered his friends and the witnesses.

Simon Jonas's testimony was of course brushed aside as being only hearsay, except with regard to the disappearance of his stock.

Ralph Harkness and Herman Jonas, with the men who had been present when the Irish cowboy was shot, offered more valuable evidence, and what they said was listened to with attention.

The substance of it was that there were two of the cattle-thieves, a man and a woman, who rode a bay horse and a black, just such as Jack Halsey and his sister were in the habit of riding, and that their general appearance was strikingly similar to that of Jack and Victoria.

Harkness gave his testimony in a fair and unprejudiced manner, admitting that he had formed his opinion of the identity of the cattle-thieves by connecting the man and the woman with the black horse and the bay.

Herman Jonas and the others showed a decided bias against the prisoner, and the young man declared his willingness to swear that Jack Halsey was one of the cattle-thieves, and that his sister was the other.

The men from the Jackson Ranch were not so positive, and showed no such prejudice.

Those who had seen the cattle-thieves, stated that there were two of them, a man and a woman, riding a bay horse and a black, and that they appeared to fit the description given by the previous witnesses; but they could not pretend to say who they were.

Aleck Sander then came forward as a witness, and his testimony at first bore hard against the prisoner.

He gave a full account of his first discovery and pursuit of the raiders, freely admitting that he then believed, from the statements of Simon Jonas and his own observations, that they were the two Halseys.

He told how he had, as he supposed at the time, chased the woman and her black horse over a cliff where the fall must have killed them, had found a black mare dead at the foot of the cliff the next morning, and stripped of saddle and bridle, and had then gone direct to the Halsey Ranch, where he found Miss Halsey alive and well, and her black mare feeding in the grass lot with the bay horse.

Then he described his second discovery and pursuit of the raiders, telling how he had followed them to the Small Hopes Ranch, and fully believed at the time that they had stopped there; but the next day the Halseys declared that they had not left home the previous night, proving by Horace Exton that they had both been there as late as eleven o'clock, and it was manifestly impossible that they should have reached the Jonas Ranch by half-past eleven, at which hour he found the raiders there.

This occurrence was something new to Simon Jonas, who scowled darkly when the detective finished his testimony.

Horace Exton then gave his evidence, fully sustaining the statements concerning the *alibi*, and the case was closed.

"Judge," Burt scratched his head, took a drink from a friend's flask, and arrived at the conclusion that the case was a very queer one.

It had been proved, he said, that the defendant was one of the cattle-thieves, and it had been quite as clearly proved that he could not have been one of them.

In the opinion of the court, the evidence in his favor was stronger than the evidence against him; but it would be well to have it all considered and passed upon by a jury, and therefore he would hold Jack Halsey for trial, but would put the bail at a low figure.

Jack easily furnished the bail that was required, and went forth a free man.

He was naturally much annoyed by his deten-

tion in jail, and was not disposed to thank for it the friends who had put him there and kept him there, as he was strongly of the opinion that they had so acted to guard their own interests, rather than his.

Uncle Abe, however, sat down upon him severely, and told him plainly that he was an ungrateful scamp.

"They did the whole business jest right," declared the Texan, "and they worked for your good as well as the good of all consarned. If they hadn't shut you up when those charges were made, they ought to ha' been hung. Why, confound it, man, it's no wonder that folks accused you of cattle-stealin'. When I heerd the evidence to-day, I was e'ena'most sure that you were guilty, until Mr. Sander and Mr. Exton chipped in and told what they knowed. 'Tain't sartin yet that you ain't guilty, and you must have doubts about it, yourself."

"Well, I don't know but you are right about that, Uncle Abe," answered Jack. "There were some strong points against me, and, as you say, the matter is not cleared up yet."

"The point is this, my boy—if you didn't steal the cattle, who did steal 'em?"

"That is what we must try to find out. As Vic says, we have plenty of enemies about here, and some of them have been playing this game to injure us, or have been helping themselves at our expense."

"It looks that way," observed Aleck Sander, "and when those folks are caught, you will be clear, and you can't be entirely clear until they are caught. So I am going to do what I can to catch them, and you must help me."

"Of course I will. I only hope that the fuss here in Oro Fino may not cause them to quit the business."

"Me, too!" put in Abe Halsey. "I'm goin' to help you see this thing through, and if we don't straighten up the tangle it won't be my fault."

"You must count me in, also," added the Englishman. "I have plenty of time to spare now, and you must call on me whenever you need me."

"That is just the right sort of talk, Mr. Exton," observed the detective. "You three are the very men I need to help me; but I shall want it understood that I am to boss the job, and that you are to help me when I call on you, and not otherwise. There is another matter to straighten up, which must be attended to as we go along. I believe that there is a chance about now to clear the memory of Jack Halsey's father, which has been under a cloud here for a long time, and in that I shall want the help of you three. But the first thing in order will be the catching of the cattle-thieves, and I shall make a business of that."

It was soon settled that Smart Aleck was not to get a chance at any cattle-thieves by remaining in the employment of Simon Jonas.

He had a talk with that ranchman after Jack Halsey's examination, which was not a pleasant interview for either party.

"I see now, Mr. Sander," said the old man, "how it is that you have been going back on me."

"Indeed," answered the detective. "I did not know that I had been going back on you."

"You have, though. Instead of helping me against those cattle-thieves, you have been helping them against me."

"I have tried to catch them, or to find out who they were. That is all. What fault have you to find with what I did or left undone?"

"When the people here wanted to give one of those cattle-thieves his deserts and hang him, you interfered to save him, and to-day you have been swearing all you could in his favor, though you must know, as well as I do, that he was guilty."

"You come pretty near hinting, Mr. Jonas, that I swore to a lie, and you may as well go slow on that sort of talk, as I can't stand much of it. Of course I helped Major Hobbs keep the peace in Oro Fino, and of course I told the truth when I was under oath to-day. I don't believe that Jack Halsey and his sister stole your cattle."

"Who did steal them, then?"

"That is a question which I am not prepared to answer. Whoever it may be, I believe that somebody on your place and in your house has been connected with the thieves and giving them information."

"Pooh! it is out of the question. You gave me that nonsense before, and I wouldn't have it."

"Since then my suspicions have been strengthened. When I last left your house I made it known that I was going to give those cattle-thieves a rest, and that very night they made another raid on your stock."

"And you traced them to the Halsey place, and there you lost them. That young scamp of a Halsey and his smart sister have pulled the wool over your eyes straight along; but they can't fool me. There has not been a cattle-raid anywhere since that rascal was shut up."

"Two nights is not much for the thieves to skip," replied the detective, "and they know what they are about."

"Now that he has been let out, you will see that they will begin the business again."

"Then I may have a chance to catch them."

"I don't believe you will do it, though, and you needn't try to do it for me any more. I would rather have no help than such as you have been giving me."

"All right, Mr. Jonas. I would rather work for no pay than such as I have been getting from you."

The same day witnessed a little collision between Horace Exton and Herman Jonas.

"You are as much to blame as anybody for the loss of life and property in Oro Fino," said the Englishman.

"How so?" demanded Herman.

"You might have stopped the whole trouble by speaking to those cowboys of yours when they started it."

"They were no longer working for my father, and I had nothing to do with them. I would not lift a finger, either, to save a rascal from hanging who deserved hanging."

"You were careful enough to keep your own skin out of the scrape, and so you stood back and egged the others on. You will get into trouble yet, if you don't drop that sort of thing."

"You are more likely to get into trouble than I am, Horace Exton. A man who is using land that don't belong to him is not doing much for law and order. Your turn will come before long."

"The sooner the better. If you try to fool with the Hole in the Ground, you may get yourself into a hole in the ground."

CHAPTER XXVII.

TOM HALSEY'S FATE.

SIMON JONAS'S prediction concerning the recurrence of the cattle-stealing in the Oro Fino district had a speedy fulfillment.

The night of the day succeeding Jack Halsey's release and return to his ranch witnessed another raid, but not upon the Jonas stock, Pete Jackson being again the sufferer.

People might naturally have supposed that Halsey, having been so lately put in deadly peril, his character still resting under a cloud, and his trial upon a serious charge impending, would have been in no hurry to renew the cattle-stealing business, or to excite any further suspicions concerning himself; but that was not the style of reasoning adopted by his enemies.

They said—and this was especially the reiterated declaration of the Jonas faction—that his guilt was proved by the fact that the raids had ceased while he was locked up, but had begun again as soon as he was released.

News of the depredation on the Jackson Ranch reached Aleck Sander at Oro Fino at a late hour of the morning after it occurred.

Intending to lose no chance that might help him to a solution of the mystery, he rode out there as soon as possible, but did not reach the ranch until late in the afternoon.

As it was then too late to begin any active operations, he accepted a cordial invitation to spend the night there and talk the matter over.

Pete Jackson, a big, good-natured, easy-going old settler, had views upon the subject which partially agreed in some respects with those of Simon Jonas, but differed from them widely in other respects.

As he and the detective sat together over their whisky and pipes in the evening, the ranchman expressed his opinions in a good-humored style, but rather guardedly.

"I don't know who they may be who have been running off cattle about here," said he, "and I don't even pretend to guess; but if they should turn out to be Tom Halsey's boy and girl—"

"They are not Tom Halsey's boy and girl," broke in Smart Aleck.

"I hope so, I'm sure."

"Can't you believe me when I say that they are not?"

"Well, I'd be glad to; but it's queer if they ain't."

"I believe you did not hear the evidence I gave at the trial in Oro Fino."

"I didn't hear it, as I wasn't there," answered the ranchman; "but I heard about it. I ain't sure that I caught onto all the pints."

"Very likely you did not, and I want to give them to you."

"Fire ahead, then, and I'll be glad to get it at first hand."

Smart Aleck told his companion the whole story of his connection with the cattle raids, considerably more fully than he had related it at Oro Fino, with all his doubts and suspicions and conclusions, and the effect was to puzzle the honest ranchman, but without materially changing his previously-formed ideas.

"It's mighty queer," said Jackson. "Simon Jonas says that they have been playin' a mighty smart game, but they must have been playin' a durned sight smarter than I can get any notion of. That Jew says that they fooled you, and I know that they would have fooled me. The pint is, you see, that if they didn't do the cattle-stealin' who did do it?"

"I don't know," answered the detective, who had often enough propounded that question to himself; "but I mean to try to find out."

"What other two folks of the kind in this district ride a bay horse and a black? What other woman can ride like Vic Halsey, or has got the pluck for that sort o' thing?"

Smart Aleck had been asked that question so often of late days that he was tired of it, and it worried him that he was not yet able to answer it.

He had looked about among the female population of the Oro Fino district, and had carefully inquired concerning them, but had been unable to hit upon any person who could begin to answer the description of the girl whom he chased to the cliff.

"I don't know," he answered; "but I say again that I mean to do my best to find out."

"If you do find 'em," suggested the ranchman, "I hope you'll go kinder easy."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, if they should turn out to be Jack Halsey and his sister, I'd rather that some way could be found to let them off; as I've got no sort of hard feelin's against those two. Tell 'em to quit the business, and, if they want anythin', let me know, and they'll be welcome to it."

"Well," remarked Sander in a tone of disgust, "I suppose I won't be able to get the idea out of your head that those two may be the cattle-thieves."

"I hope they ain't, you see; but, if they are, I would be glad to have the thing quieted down. I knew their father well, and I would at any time much rather help them than hurt them."

This statement set Smart Aleck off on another track.

He had been for some time anxious to learn the exact circumstances connected with the death of Tom Halsey, and he thought that he saw here a chance to get hold of what he wanted.

"You speak as if you had been a friend of their father's," he said.

"So I was," answered Jackson. "I've never been ashamed to say that I was a friend of Tom Halsey's. I liked him well."

"Perhaps you can tell me, then, how he died, and all about that business—what was the charge against him, and what was the proof of the charge?"

"I reckon you know well enough how he died. He was hung by a party of Vigilantes, or men who called themselves Vigilantes, because they said he had been caught in the act of stealin' cattle. The rest of the business seems to me to be rather mixed."

"That is just what I want to know about, Mr. Jackson."

"Well, I wasn't thar, you see, and what I know is only hearsay; but I inquired around at the time pretty carefully, and I remember all the pints I picked up."

"Thar war more or less cattle-thievin' in this district at that time, and a sort of organization was started, with Si Jonas at the head of it, to ketch the thieves."

"One day he got 'em together—thar was eight or ten men in the band—and at night he led 'em to a place in the hills, whar he told 'em to hide and wait."

"They did hide and wait, and after a while Tom Halsey came along, drivin' a bunch of stolen cattle."

"Thar war no doubt that they'd been stole, as the brand spoke for itself, and one of the Vigilantes was the owner of the steers, so it looked like a clear case."

"Tom Halsey seemed to be sorter surprised when they jumped out and nabbed him, and he declared that he was all right, and the cattle were all right."

"He said that he had met a man driving the cattle, whose name was Zeke Streen, who said that he had bought the bunch, and he begged Tom Halsey to help him drive 'em a while, and Tom, bein' a good-natured fellow, turned in and helped him."

"Zeke Streen, so Tom said, had stopped for a few minutes a little way back, but would ketch up soon, and then the business would be straightened up."

"They waited for Zeke Streen, but he didn't come, and then some of 'em went back to look for him, but couldn't find hide nor hair of him."

"It stuck in thar craws that thar wasn't no such man as Zeke Streen, and poor Tom's story was so durned ridiculous, anyhow, that they said he was guilty, and strung him right up."

"That's the way Tom Halsey died, and those are the pints that I picked up at the time."

"The strangest thing about the business," observed Sander, "is the part that was taken by Simon Jonas."

"Yes, that always looked mighty queer to me, and I ain't the only man who has been puzzled by it."

"The question is, how did he know just where to take those men to, and just when Tom Halsey would be along with the cattle?"

"Thar's two ways to answer that. In the first place, I might say that somebody must have blowed the business to Si Jonas, and so he knew just where and when to nab the thief. But thar's another pint that I've often considered, and thar may be somethin' in it."

"That's what I want to get at, Mr. Jackson. Give me that."

"I happen to know that Si Jonas had a mean and bitter grudge against Tom Halsey. Tom had a piece of land that Jonas wanted right badly; but they couldn't come anywhar near agreein' on the price, because Tom didn't want to sell it, and the Jew swore that he would get that land, anyhow."

"And he did get it, after Halsey's death. I have heard of that."

"So he did, and here's the rest of the pint. Thar was a man named Zeke Streen hangin' around this district for some time, and Si Jonas had more or less to do with him. He left the country after Tom Halsey's case was settled. Jonas said that cattle-stealin' was stopped after Tom Halsey's death. Maybe we might as well say that it was stopped after Zeke Streen lit out. Puttin' this and that together, how does it look to you?"

"There is another point to add to that," answered the detective. "Zeke Streen has been about here lately, and he has seen Simon Jonas, and he has a hold upon him."

Perceiving that the ranchman really sympathized with the Halsey side of the case, Smart Aleck detailed to him the conversation which he had overheard between Simon Jonas and Zeke Streen, and Pete Jackson was excited to fighting pitch.

"That's it!" he exclaimed. "That straightens out the notion that has stuck to me for a long time. Si Jonas started that scheme to get Tom Halsey out of the way, and Zeke Streen is the man he hired to help him work it. We must get hold of that Zeke Streen."

"I've been looking for him," said Sander, "and I mean to hunt closer. When I find him, I will also have to hit upon some way to make him tell what he knows."

"He has got to be found, and you may call on me to meet all the expenses, and any other help you want you will be welcome to. When we once get our grip on him, I'll warrant that a way will be found to make him squeal."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HOLE IN THE HILLS.

AT an early hour the next morning Aleck Sander was roused up and given his breakfast, that he might begin the search which he proposed to make at the Jackson Ranch.

No person on the place had seen the cattle-thieves at the last raid, and the discovery of the theft had been made by missing the stock and noticing the manner in which they seemed to have been taken away.

Therefore there was no ground for present suspicions of the Halseys or anybody else in particular.

Under these circumstances the detective believed that the best thing he could do would be to endeavor to find the trail and follow it as far as he could, though Pete Jackson assured him that he would only waste his time in doing so.

"If you find it," said the ranchman, "you will follow it until it strikes some road, and then you will be bound to lose it."

However, Smart Aleck was there to take chances, and he went with Pete Jackson and one of his best herders to hunt the trail.

It was difficult at the start to discover it and separate it from the vast number of cattle tracks that were thickly scattered about; but it was finally got hold of, and was then carefully traced until the tracks of the stolen bunch, with the horses of their drivers, formed a clear and plain trail of their own.

After thanking his companions for their help, Sander set out to follow this trail alone.

He considered himself a good trailer, as he had done some very difficult work in that line, and was sure that he possessed one important requisite for that occupation—the virtue of patience.

For a considerable distance he had no difficulty in keeping the trail on horseback; dismounting occasionally to make sure of it when he crossed rocky ground.

This was all very well as long as the trail stuck to the plains and the woods; but in the course of time, as Pete Jackson had predicted, it struck into a traveled road, where it was of course not to be distinguished from the tracks made by vehicles and other animals.

Aleck Sander was not the man to be baffled by such an obstacle as that.

He did not believe that any cattle-thieves would travel a public road far with stolen stock, and he was convinced that the particular thieves he was hunting must have a rendezvous or depot somewhere, to which they took the cattle before butchering them or sending them off to be disposed of.

Therefore, he dismounted and pursued his search on foot, watching each side of the road carefully to discover a trail branching off from it, and it was not long before he found one.

A close examination of the tracks convinced him that it was the trail he wanted, as it was about the same age as that with which he had started, and apparently about the same size, with the tracks of two shod horses in and about it.

Satisfied that he was on the right course, he mounted and went forward cheerfully.

The trail led him into the hills, and he follow-

ed it as rapidly as possible, wishing to get to the end of it before night set in, as his search thus far had consumed a good part of the day.

It was rather more difficult, however, than he had found it to be before it struck the road.

The cattle and their drivers had necessarily gone much more rapidly than the trailer was able to go, and it seemed to him that the thieves had not been at all sure of their route, or had trouble in keeping it, as the trail wound about strangely, and more than once nearly doubled upon itself.

It was what might be styled an inebriated trail.

The day was drawing toward its close when Smart Aleck followed the trail down toward a valley which seemed to him, from the view he got of it at that hour and from that position, to resemble the valley in which he had found the dead black mare at the foot of the cliff.

He went down to the head of the valley, where the trail seemed to end in a hollow which had but a small opening outward.

This hole in the hills in fact was a sort of secondary valley on a small scale, nearly surrounded by rocky elevations, and shaded by tall trees, but grassy and well watered, the little stream which ran down the main valley taking its rise there.

What interested Aleck Sander, however, more than anything else was the appearance of human occupation which the spot presented.

Having made this discovery, he led his horse up a little higher, hitched him where he could not be seen from below, and descended into the hole on foot.

In so doing he made sure that his revolver was in its proper place and order, and was careful to make as little noise as possible in going down.

He had undoubtedly reached the rendezvous or depot of the cattle-thieves which he had been seeking, as the grass had been eaten down, and signs of the recent presence and butchery of cattle were abundant.

At that time there were no signs of the presence of the human occupants of the spot; but there was a dug-out in the hillside, walled up with turf except an opening for the door, which told him where they were or had been.

They did not seem to be there just then.

The cattle had all been taken away, and the thieves and their assistants—for they must have assistants—had apparently departed.

Appearances, however, are often deceitful, and Smart Aleck moved forward quietly and cautiously to examine the dug-out.

After listening and hearing no sound, he pushed open the rude door, saw nobody within, and entered.

The dug-out was close and ill-smelling, and the furniture—if its belongings could be so styled—was of the scantiest and of the poorest quality possible.

There was a rough couch spread upon poles, a few battered and dirty cooking utensils, a block of wood for a seat, some dried or smoked beef hanging in strips, and scarcely anything else that was worth speaking of.

The establishment was evidently the habitation of only one person, and the detective searched it thoroughly but in vain in the hope of finding some clew to the identity of that person.

There was not a scrap of writing of any kind in the den, nor so much as a bit of newspaper.

It was a sure thing that the occupant was not literary in his tastes.

Smart Aleck stepped outside and considered the matter for a few moments.

He had found the headquarters of the gang, or at least their rendezvous and hiding-place; but none of them was there.

The occupant of the dug-out might be expected to return before a great while, whether any of the others should show up or not, and perhaps it might be a good plan to wait there for him or them. But the detective had not come prepared for such a siege, and neither he nor his horse would be able to endure a long vigil at that place.

Under the circumstances it seemed to be enough that he had located the spot, that he could head for it when he should again hear of a cattle raid, and that he might have it watched if he should deem that precaution necessary.

Considerations of his own comfort doubtless had their influence in deciding him to leave the hole in the hills alone for a while.

He led his horse down to the hollow, mounted, and rode out into the valley.

It was then getting dark, but he recognized the valley as he rode down as one which he had previously visited, and was sure that he would have no difficulty in finding it again, or in reaching the hiding-place of the cattle-thieves without taking such a rough and roundabout route as that which had brought him there.

Knowing well where he was, it was easy for him to go on to Oro Fino, and thither he rode briskly.

It was very late at night—that is to say, well on toward morning—when he reached the town, and he went at once to the stable where he kept his horse, and attended to the wants of the faithful steed.

As even the saloons and gambling-houses were closed at that hour, and Oro Fino was, for a

wonder, nearly shrouded in darkness, the detective thought of nothing then but getting to the hotel and going to bed.

As he was walking thither he noticed that the last light in one of the saloons, which was also a gambling-house, was just then extinguished, and he perceived two men coming out of the door, which was closed and locked behind them.

One of them was apparently pretty drunk, and was partially supported by the other, with whom he was remonstrating audibly and profanely.

Aleck Sander, who never forgot a face or a voice, was sure that he heard the speech of Zeke Streen, and he turned quickly and looked at the man.

The face told him, as the voice had suggested to him, that the inebriated person was no other than Zeke Streen.

What should he do? He had found the man he wanted; but it was not easy to decide how he was to profit by the discovery.

He had no excuse for capturing the man, and Streen had a companion who would be likely to fight for him, and that would cause a collision which the detective preferred to avoid.

Besides, there was no reason to suppose that such a proceeding would result in inducing the captive to tell what he knew, and it seemed to Sander that it would be best to catch him alone and in some way exert a pressure upon him that would extort the truth from him.

So he determined to follow Streen and discover his abiding-place, with the view of picking him up when he wanted him.

If he had realized the extent of the task he was to undertake in executing this determination, it is probable that he would have let it alone; but that unpleasantness was to dawn on him gradually, and he was not a man to back out when he had started.

Streen's companion led him to where two horses were hitched, and they mounted.

There was some difficulty in getting the inebriated man up; but when he was on horseback his drunkenness seemed to disappear, and he rode off as straight and solid as any sober person.

If Smart Aleck's horse had not then been out of his reach, he would have doubted the feasibility of following them on horseback, as the really sober one might be expected to discover the pursuit and baffle it.

He could follow them on foot silently and without danger of being perceived, and that was what he started in to do.

Having started, he had no thought of stopping, though they led him a long and tedious tramp.

Most of the time the detective's task was comparatively easy, as they traveled at a walk; but occasionally they spurred up their horses for a considerable stretch, and he was forced to put his legs to lively use to keep them in sight.

Just as day was breaking they turned into a valley which Sander easily recognized in the early morning light.

It was the valley in which he had found the black mare dead, and at the head of which he had discovered the hiding-place of the cattle-thieves.

At once the idea dawned upon him that he was going to learn who was the occupant of the dug-out, and at the same time to fix the abiding-place of Zeke Streen, and, weary and footsore as he was, he followed the horsemen at a pretty rapid gait up to the head of the valley.

When they passed into the hollow there, he kept close to them, and saw them dismount, turn their horses loose, and enter the dug-out together.

This satisfied him. He had learned what he wanted to learn, and considerably more than he could have expected.

Zeke Streen was the occupant of the dug-out, and of course he was connected with the cattle-thieves.

Therefore the detectives knew where to look for him when he wanted him, and it was highly probable that he would be able to get such a hold upon him as might squeeze the truth out of him.

These points being settled, Sander had nothing more to do there at the time, but had before him the long journey back to Oro Fino on foot.

Though he was greatly cheered on the way by the thought of the valuable discoveries he had made, it was a very painful journey to him in his worn out condition, especially as he had had scarcely anything to eat since the previous morning, and when he finally got back to town he was so completely used up that he could not take any food, but stumbled to his bed, where he was immediately lost in a deep and refreshing slumber.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH.

CARL KLEIN had been badly wounded in the fight at Oro Fino jail.

He had the best medical attendance the town could give, and it was decided that his wounds were not fatal, or even dangerous; but some time must elapse before he could recover sufficiently to get about.

What he needed was good nursing, and that he got from his friend and partner, who remained with him and took the best possible care of him.

The German, however, was made reckless by his enforced stay at Oro Fino, and insisted upon being removed to the cabin at the Hole in the Ground.

He knew that Exton was anxious to be there, and he also wished to be on hand to watch the property, and he was sure that his partner, with the help of Lemon Squeezer, could take quite as good care of him out there as at Oro Fino.

He kept up this teasing until his physician, perceiving that his unsatisfied desire was making him nervous and hindering his recovery, consented that he should be taken to the Hole in the Ground.

Lemon Squeezer had been sent out there directly after the disturbance in town was ended, to take care of the cabin and watch the mine, and of course everything out there would be found in excellent order.

Horace Exton made the best arrangements he could for conveying his partner to what he called his home.

He got a two-horse spring wagon in which Klein was placed on the most comfortable couch that could be arranged for him, and set out with a driver for the wagon, and with two friends who had volunteered to go along for company and to see that the invalid was safely deposited in the cabin.

A pleasant day was taken for the removal, and the start was at an early hour, and the journey was made easily and nicely, seeming to help the patient rather than to hurt him.

As the party came in sight of the cabin at the Hole in the Ground, a little way beyond which was the mine, they heard the sound of loud and angry voices, and then a pistol-shot, followed by a yell of agony.

"Lemon Squeezer is in trouble," shouted the Englishman as he dashed forward, and his two friends instantly followed him.

The Italian was, indeed, in serious trouble, and through no fault of his own, but simply because of his faithfulness in guarding the interests of his employers who were also his friends.

Though nothing of value was visible in the mine since the pocket had been exhausted, Lemon Squeezer watched it closely during the day, and at night slept in the Hole in the Ground; but there was no occurrence to excite or annoy him until shortly before the arrival of the party with Carl Klein.

A few men rode up to the cabin while the Italian was out getting wood.

Looking in at the open door, and seeing nobody there, they passed on toward the mine.

Lemon Squeezer caught sight of them then, and hurried to protect the Hole in the Ground.

Perceiving that the party was headed by Herman Jonas, and remembering the claim and threat which that young man had previously made in behalf of his father, he anticipated trouble, and was sorry that he was alone there to meet it.

Yet there was not the least sign of a disposition on his part to show the white feather, nor did he once think of running away and deserting his trust.

He boldly took his stand at the mouth of the mine hole, and faced the invaders as they rode up to him.

"Clear out, you nigger!" ordered Herman Jonas. "Clear out, I say, before you get hurt!"

"Nigga you'sellif," retorted Lemon Squeezer, and he warned off the intruders fiercely and forcibly.

"This land is my father's property," declared the young man, "and I have his orders to clear off all squatters. I am going to shut up this mine hole and tear down that cabin, and it won't be safe for anybody to meddle with me. You had better get out of the way quietly, as you know that you can't begin to fight this party."

In his broken English, but plainly enough to be understood, the Italian announced his determination of staying right there, and vowed that no person could touch the Hole in the Ground while he lived.

"Get down, Pete, and lay that fellow by the heels!" ordered the young ranchman.

The cowboy started to dismount, and Lemon Squeezer, believing that he was about to be attacked, drew a revolver.

This was just what the intruders wanted, and one of them fired upon him instantly.

The poor Italian, foully and brutally murdered, uttered a yell of agony, and fell helpless to the ground.

"We might have got along without that," grumbled Jonas.

"The durned nigger mought ha' made trouble," answered Pete, "and he is out of the way now."

"Look out! There come his friends!"

The sound of the galloping of horses near by produced a sudden change in the situation.

Herman Jonas set the example of flight, and his companions were not slow to follow his example.

They had been brave enough to shoot down the poor Italian, but had not the grit to stand and face three men.

A few pistol-shots made their exit more speedy, and directly Horace Exton and his two friends rode down to the mine-hole.

As they were unwilling to get far away from Carl Klein, they made no attempt to pursue the marauders, but dismounted and sought to give succor to the Italian.

Lemon Squeezer was beyond the reach of succor.

He had breath enough to tell his employer that Herman Jonas had headed the gang of trespassers, and then he expired in Exton's arms.

Sadly, but full of wrath and vengeful feelings, the Englishman led his friends back to Carl Klein, who was greatly grieved when he was informed of the death of Lemon Squeezer.

The wagon was driven to the cabin, and Carl was carefully lifted out and carried inside, where Exton busied himself, with the help of his friends, in preparing something to eat.

They offered to stay and help him bury the Italian; but he declared himself able to perform that office alone, and they returned to Oro Fino.

Before the close of the day the Englishman brought up the body and buried it near the cabin.

The next day he busied himself with cutting an inscription on a headstone for the grave.

The death of Lemon Squeezer made a change in affairs at the Hole in the Ground.

Though Exton was well able to take care of his friend without any assistance, and though Klein improved rapidly under his care, they both grieved over the loss of the faithful Italian, and were quite lonely without him.

There was the sorrowful fact, too, that he had died in the defense of their property, and was that wretched Hole in the Ground worth a life?

Thus far they had got from it little besides loss and disappointment, and what was the use of worrying about it any more?

Exton had stuck to it stoutly, if not stubbornly, adhering to his determination of continuing the work and endeavoring to strike the vein as soon as circumstances would allow him to do so; but the death of Lemon Squeezer made a change in his views.

He was then willing to agree with his partner's opinion, that the Hole in the Ground was not worth fighting for, and that it would be their best plan to leave it as soon as Klein was able to get away, and seek fortune elsewhere, as men of their caliber could easily find profitable employment in more thickly-settled communities.

"That is the best thing, my friend," said Carl, "and we will keep quiet until we are able to leave this place. The men who want the land will not trouble me while I am lying sick here, and they will not trouble you if we give up the rest to them, which we can well afford to do."

Exton agreed to this with his lips, but not entirely with his heart.

It was one thing to abandon the Hole in the Ground, and quite another thing to leave the country and give up his hopes of Victoria Halsey. As he did not consider the success of the mine necessary to the success of his suit, one failure need not be followed by another.

There rankled in his heart, also, a feeling of enmity toward the Jonas tribe, and he hated to go away without doing something to make them suffer for the death of poor Lemon Squeezer.

These thoughts led him to some further work in the mine, which he did when he could be spared from the bedside of his friend.

Carl asked him what he was doing there, and his explanation was not remarkably clear.

"I have been trying to arrange the Hole in the Ground," said he, "so as to give the Jonases a proper reception when they come to take possession of it."

"I thought we had agreed that the thing was not worth fighting for," observed Carl.

"That's so, and I am not thinking of fighting for it. I will just let it fight for itself."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I have set a better guard over the Hole in the Ground than poor Lemon Squeezer was, though not a more faithful one, and one that those wretches won't be likely to get the drop on."

CHAPTER XXX.

FAIR WARNING.

ALECK SANDER was not the only person who incurred the displeasure of Simon Jonas by his conduct at what was called the trial of Jack Halsey.

The Jew ranchman also seriously disapproved of the performance of Ralph Harkness on that occasion.

Harkness, as has been said, was a fair-minded man, who was not disposed to favor even his employer any further than he believed he might rightfully do, and his evidence in the Halsey case, given without any prejudice or bias, was not specially harmful to the prisoner.

This added one more to the various causes of complaint that had occurred from time to time; but Harkness was so valuable as a ranch fore-

man, that Simon Jonas was unwilling to pick a quarrel with him to the extent of parting with him.

He showed his displeasure only by grumbling, and Ralph declared that for his part he was satisfied with his own action.

Before long, however, the old man had a cause for complaint that angered him beyond endurance, and a rupture ensued.

This grievance, indeed, may be likened to the last straw that broke the camel's back.

Herman Jonas, as has been seen, started the crusade against the proprietors of the Hole in the Ground Mine, and the first movement resulted in the brutal murder of Lemon Squeezer, and the ignominious flight of the crusaders.

This failure angered the old man, and made him more eager to gain speedy possession of what he declared to be his property.

The method which he proposed to employ was that of violence; his intention being to send a party to take forcible possession of the mine.

As he did not consider his son Herman an altogether competent leader for such a party on such an errand, he naturally applied to his foreman, who was a man of decision and undoubted bravery, and invited him to command the expedition.

Ralph Harkness, instead of refusing absolutely, sought to argue him out of his intention.

"Seems to me that you may as well go sorter slow in that business," observed the foreman. "I don't see clearly what right you have to claim that mine, anyhow."

"The land belongs to me," answered Jonas. "My title is perfect, and I have a right to remove all squatters."

"Squatters and miners are two different things, Mr. Jonas. As I understand it, Exton and his partner have a claim that was properly made out and recorded before you entered the land. Even if you had owned it from the time of Adam, their claim would ride over yours for what it covers."

"Do you mean to tell me that any people who choose to do so can squat on my land and hold it against the owner, or sell what they call their right to other people, and keep me out of what's my own? I won't stand any such nonsense as that."

The courts are in working order, Mr. Jonas, and you can try the question there if you want to. It looks to me as if you don't believe that the decision would be in your favor, and for that reason you want to rough in and get hold of the mine."

"That is neither here nor there; but it is an old saying that possession is nine points of the law, and I mean to rough in, as you say, and take possession of my own property, and then those who want to fight for it in the courts may do so. The only question is whether I can depend on you to take charge of the men and go down there and attend to that business for me."

"If it comes to that, Mr. Jonas, I must say that you can't depend on me to go an inch. I was hired to act as foreman of your ranch here, and I am always willing to attend to the ranch business, but to nothing of that sort outside."

"In that case, Mr. Harkness, you and I must part. You have worried me and thwarted me in so many matters that I have lost patience at last. I have no use for a man who argues against my orders, and refuses to make my interests his own."

"And I have no use for a man who thinks that he can pay me to do a mean action. I am satisfied to go."

Ralph Harkness did go, and Simon Jonas believed that he could get along very well without him.

The stock and labor on the ranch had been largely diminished, and the old man had received information to the effect that Exton and Klein were alone at the Hole in the Ground, one of them laid up by his wounds, and the other making no effort for the defense of the mine.

Under those circumstances Herman could be trusted to lead the expedition.

The day after his departure from the Jonas Ranch Ralph Harkness put in an appearance at the Hole in the Ground.

Horace Exton had moved his partner's couch near to the open door, and was seated just outside of the cabin, enjoying his pipe in the balmy air, which was just then neither too warm nor too cold for comfort.

The sight of a solitary horseman riding down into the little valley was quite an event for them and the Englishman mentioned it to his partner.

"The man looks like Ralph Harkness," he added. "Yes, I am sure it is he."

"I wonder what he comes here for?" remarked Carl. "No good, I am afraid."

"I don't know about that. He carries his rifle, but is alone, and he has no grudge against us that I know of."

"His employer has, as you know, and it was Harkness who came here with Jonas to order us off."

"Yes, but he did not seem to take much interest in that proceeding, and I think he is safe."

Harkness was pleasantly greeted when he rode

up, and it was soon made evident that his errand was not an unfriendly one.

He was invited to alight, and did so, accepted the hospitalities of the cabin as conveyed through the medium of a jug, inquired kindly into the progress of Klein's recovery, lighted a pipe, and made himself generally at home.

"How are things at the Jonas establishment?" inquired Exton.

"I don't know much about them just now," answered Harkness. "I have left there."

"Indeed! That is hard on the Jew. Why did you leave, if it is a fair question?"

"Discharged because I wasn't willing to take a hand in stealing a mine. The fact is, Mr. Exton, that I have come here to-day to give you a sort of a warning."

"Thank you. Warn ahead."

"Simon Jonas has been making up a party to come here and jump your claim."

"He tried that a little while ago, and his party succeeded in killing our Italian, and I don't expect to forget that job."

"He is going to try it again, and this time he intends to make sure work of it. You may look for his party any day."

"Let them come. I am ready for them."

"But you are not prepared to fight them. You have no force to defend the mine."

"I don't mean to defend it, and they may come whenever they want to. By Jove! isn't that the crowd, coming down the hill yonder?"

"That is just what it is," answered Harkness.

"If you have no objection, I will step inside. Not that I am afraid of them—I suppose you understand that—but because I would just a little bit prefer that they should not see me here. If you need help, I will be on hand."

The invalid's couch was moved back, and the door was closed, and the Englishman continued to smoke his pipe placidly outside.

It seemed rather suspicious to him—the appearance of Harkness, and his secreting himself in the cabin, just as the invading force was about to arrive.

This was, in fact, suggestive of a possible fire in the rear; but Exton considered that the size of the force would render such an intervention unnecessary, and he had no intention of offering any resistance.

All he cared for was the safety of his partner, and surely no person could be mean enough to attack a helpless man for no cause.

The approaching party was composed of five men, all abundantly armed, and led by Herman Jonas—six men in all.

They rode down to the cabin, a formidable array, and halted there, and young Jonas acted as spokesman for the party.

"We have come," he said, "to take possession of the mine-hole down there, which is on my father's property, and belongs to him. Have you anything to say about it?"

"Only this," answered the Englishman between the puffs of his pipe. "The mine belongs to my partner and myself, and our claim has been recorded, and you have no right to meddle with it. If you have come here to take it by force and arms, I am unable to resist you. I only ask that you shall not interfere with my partner, who is sick in here."

"We don't want to trouble any sick men," replied Herman—"or any well men either, if they let us alone. Come on, boys, and we will look into that hole and see what is to be done about it."

"Just one word more," remarked Exton. "As one of the owners of that property, I advise you to let it alone, and you had better take my advice, or you may get hurt."

"Don't give us any nonsense," retorted young Jonas. "We are here on business, and are going to attend to business."

"Go on, then. I have given you fair warning, and if anything happens to you when you are trespassing on my property, it will be no fault of mine."

CHAPTER XXXI.

DEATH AND DISCOVERY.

WITH an expression of contempt for the warning, the Jonas party rode away, and Horace Exton continued to smoke his pipe placidly.

As the sound of their horses' steps died away, Ralph Harkness opened the door and looked out.

"Where have they gone to?" he inquired.

"Down to the mine to take possession of it," answered Exton. "I told them that they had better leave it alone; but they were stubborn, and may the Lord have mercy on their souls!"

"You speak as if you had sentenced them to death," observed the ex-foreman.

"If they die, it is their own doings. I gave them fair warning, and they will get no more than they deserve, anyhow."

There was only one of the marauders upon whom the miner's words of warning seemed to have the least effect, and that was Pete Van Vorst, who had been so active and willing when poor Lemon Squeezer was slaughtered.

"I'd like to know what he meant by that warnin' of his'n," said Pete.

"Just nothing at all," answered Herman Jonas a little testily. "How could he mean

anything by it? "He has nobody here but himself, and he can do nothing to stop us."

"But I don't like his style. He was too durned quiet and easy goin', and that makes me think that he means mischief."

"It seems to me that you are getting cranky, Pete. It can't be that you are afraid."

"No, it ain't that; but I don't fancy walkin' into traps."

The Hole in the Ground was but a little distance from the cabin and in sight of it.

When the marauders got there they found themselves confronted by more warnings.

In front of the mine-hole was a stake, on which was a board with the inscription:

"KEEP AWAY FROM HERE!"

At the mouth of the mine was another board with the word:

"DANGER!"

"Seems to me that this must mean something," remarked Pete Van Vorst.

"Of course it means something," angrily replied Herman Jonas. "It means an attempt at a big bluff, but as weak an attempt as I ever saw. If we should allow ourselves to be backed down by such a bluff as that, we would deserve to be kicked all over the district."

"It may be a bluff, but I don't like the looks of it."

"Your likes or dislikes have nothing to do with the matter. As I told that fellow up at the cabin, we are here for business, and we mean to tend to it."

Herman Jonas peered in at the mouth of the mine, and saw nothing to cause him uneasiness.

"There is nobody in there," said he.

"If thar ain't somebody, thar may be something," objected Van Vorst.

"Pete, you have turned out to be a crank, and I am disappointed in you. Come, boys; all we have to do is to go in there and decide whether it will be worth while for us to guard the hole. Tip Ross, you understand about mines, and I was told to depend on your judgment. You and Nebraska Bob will go in there with me, and Pete and the other two can stay outside to guard the entrance, though there is no danger that anybody will come down on us."

Herman Jonas and the two men he had mentioned entered the tunnel, while Pete Van Vorst stepped back and handled his rifle as if he expected a collision.

Five minutes passed, and it appeared that the explorers had struck a light; but nothing had yet happened.

A few minutes more, and there was an explosion that shook the earth, and a cloud of dust and smoke poured out of the mouth of the mine.

Horace Exton and Ralph Harkness, who were gazing in that direction from the cabin door, heard the explosion and saw the cloud of smoke and dust.

"What has happened down there?" demanded Harkness.

"It is quite likely that somebody has got hurt," answered Exton. "As some of them may take it into their heads to come back at me, I will get my rifle."

Harkness also got his rifle, and the two weapons were set against the cabin wall outside, and the Englishman resumed his seat and his smoke.

The development which they awaited came after a while, but proved to be of a character that did not call for the use of rifles.

One of the men who had been left outside at the mine came hurrying up to the cabin; but he was alone, and his intentions were evidently unwelcome.

This man was Pete Van Vorst, and his countenance was considerably elongated, and his speech was mild and peaceable enough to satisfy a Quaker.

"Thar's been an accident down yonder," said he, "and I'm afraid that some of our men have been killed."

"I was afraid that something of the kind would happen," remarked Exton; "but I gave you folks fair warning, and did all I could to keep you away from there. What seems to have been the matter?"

"An explosion back in the tunnel."

"That is what I thought it was. I had prepared a charge which I was going to let off after a while, and it was left in such a condition that it would be dangerous for any person but myself to enter the mine. It is a pity that people want to meddle with other people's property."

As a matter of fact, he had arranged a wire so that the touch of a foot would explode the charge, and had thus fulfilled his promise to make the mine defend itself.

Whatever Pete Van Vorst may have suspected, he had not come there to argue the point, but to ask for help.

"We don't know yet who is hurt, or how bad," said he, "my partners are tryin' to git the rock out of the way and go in, and I thought I'd better come up here and ask you to help us."

"I will do so cheerfully, as you are disposed to be friendly," answered the Englishman. "Here is Mr. Harkness, too, who happened

along here just before you came, and I have no doubt that he will gladly lend a hand."

Exton made a brief statement of the occurrence to his partner, closed the cabin door, and went down to the mine with Harkness and Van Vorst.

The smoke and dust had entirely subsided, and the two remaining men were working hard to make a passage into the tunnel.

The explosion had occurred in the floor of the drift, near its inner extremity, and it was no easy task to carry or move aside the fragments of rock that blocked the way; but the five men worked with a will, and cries for help soon convinced them that at least one of those who had been caught by the explosion was alive.

Only one of them was alive, as the workers discovered when they had succeeded in making a passage.

Herman Jonas and Tip Ross were dead, and Nebraska Bob was so badly hurt that he was helpless.

The last named was carefully carried up to the cabin to keep company with the invalid there, and then the two bodies were brought out and laid on the grass in the shade.

Pete Van Vorst sent one of his comrades to Oro Fino for medical assistance, and he rode off to carry the news to Simon Jonas, leaving the third man to watch the bodies, as Exton guaranteed that the best possible care should be taken of Nebraska Bob.

Ralph Harkness remained at the request of Exton, to whom he had taken a great liking, and his presence, as well as his assistance, was a real comfort to the Englishman.

"Did you put up that job on them, Exton?" inquired Ralph, as they smoked their pipes together outside after the evening meal.

"Did I set that trap you mean? Yes, I set that trap—not for them in particular, but for all intruders. As I told Klein a while ago, I meant to make the mine defend itself, and it got in its work in good style."

"Indeed it did."

"Those men had no right there, and I gave them fair warning to keep away. They got what they deserved, and I am not a bit sorry for it. It was right that some of them should suffer for the murder of poor Lemon Squeezer."

The next day Pete Van Vorst returned with a wagon to remove his dead and wounded comrades.

He reported Simon Jonas as being so badly broken up by the death of his son, that he could not think of coming with the wagon, or of taking active measures of any kind.

So the two bodies were loaded into the wagon, and Nebraska Bob, by the permission of the physicians who had come from Oro Fino, was packed up so that he could travel, and the Jonas party left the Hole in the Ground, unregretted by those who remained there.

The same day Exton, leaving Ralph Harkness to keep his partner company, went to the mine to note more closely the damage that had been done by the explosion.

Nearly three hours elapsed before he returned to the cabin, and when he came in, just at dusk, there was so much suppressed excitement visible in his countenance, though he was outwardly calm and quiet, that Klein eagerly asked him what was the matter.

"I will tell you in a minute," answered the Englishman, as he seated himself and lighted his pipe. "The matter is, old man, that it's an ill wind that blows good to nobody. The blast that brought sorrow to the Jonas family has made our future."

"Another pocket?" queried Carl.

"Something better than a pocket. I have struck the true fissure vein, and no mistake about it this time. That blast opened it just where I would not have thought of looking for it. Here is some of the stuff, and I have no doubt that you will agree with me that it has come from the vein."

The German called for his microscope, and carefully examined the pieces that were handed to him.

As a physician can easily distinguish venous from arterial blood, so can an expert miner, especially if he is a trained mineralogist, decide upon the quality and *habitat* of fresh ore.

Though the specimens were not near as rich as those which were forthcoming when the "pocket" was opened, they were rich enough to give splendid promise, and Carl had no hesitation in saying that the fissure vein had really been struck.

"We won't give up the Hole in the Ground now," triumphantly exclaimed Exton.

"You had better not let Simon Jonas hear of your luck, or he will be likely to go for the mine again," suggested Harkness.

"I mean to let everybody hear of it, and if he goes for the mine again, he will get hurt worse than ever."

The next day, leaving Ralph Harkness in charge of the invalid, Exton went to Oro Fino to hire men to work the mine, and at the same time to defend it.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"ONLY ONCE MORE."

THE unexpected and violent death of Herman Jonas was a terrible blow to his father.

At first the old man raved like a lunatic, sobbing and "taking on" after the passionate manner of his race, and was so useless for any practical purpose that Pete Van Vorst took upon himself the responsibility and the task of making arrangements to bring home the dead and the wounded.

By the time they arrived at the ranch Simon Jonas had calmed down and settled into a condition of moping melancholy.

He did not plan any act of vengeance for the calamity, nor did any of his speech point in that direction, as he was well enough acquainted with the legal aspects of the case to know that he had sent his son on an unlawful errand.

Even if it could have been proved that the deadly blast had been arranged as a trap, public opinion and the law would uphold men who used any means to protect their property against claim-jumpers.

Indeed though he did not say as much to any person but his wife, the old man blamed himself for the loss of his son, and felt that if he had kept Ralph Harkness and followed the foreman's advice, Herman would still be alive to comfort him.

After the burial of the young man Simon Jonas was confronted by a serious problem.

Herman had been not only his favorite, but his counselor and main dependence, and perhaps the fact of this favoritism may have had much to do with Isaac's disposition to go wrong and get into wild ways.

However that might be, a determined effort must be made to reform the younger son and fit him to fill the place of his brother.

It may be added that Ikey was quite willing to be reformed by proper persuasion, as his disposition to go wrong had led him much further than he had expected it to, and he was anxious to get out of the tangle into which his wild ways had brought him.

He had been fond of Herman, though he had not respected him, regarding his elder brother as a Jacob and himself as an Esau, and when he saw a chance to step into the birthright, he was more than ready to draw a line between his past and his future.

So Simon Jonas, when he called his remaining son to a private and important conference, found him entirely amenable to advice.

"You are the only son left to me now," said the old man, when he had sufficiently enlarged upon the virtues of Herman and lamented his death.

"I had hoped that Herman would live long to be a stay and comfort to me in my old age; but he has been called away, and now I must depend upon you or nobody."

"Just give me a fair trial," pleaded Ikey, "and you will see that I will come out all right."

"You shall have a fair trial and more than a fair chance. If you will stay at home, take your brother's place on the ranch, learn the business, and attend to it properly, I will allow you a handsome sum as wages, and at my death, after making proper provision for your mother and sister, all my property shall be yours."

Ikey's eyes glistened. His father named a sum that was really a handsome one. It would not pay his debts right away, and he dared not ask for money for that purpose or disclose the nature of his indebtedness; but the arrangement promised to put him square with the world, and just then the death of Herman seemed to be a providential interposition in his favor.

"You can do what I require of you if you want to," continued the old man, "and by so doing you will greatly benefit yourself as well as your family. If you don't do it, I will sell out here and go back to the East, and will leave you to take care of yourself."

The choice between starvation and affluence was an easy one to make, and Ikey Jonas jumped at the offer.

"It is a fair offer," said he, "and I will try to do as well by you as you propose to do by me. I will come right down to my fodder, and will begin work on the ranch to-morrow."

Easy as promises may be, performance is often difficult.

After the conference with his father Ikey Jonas also found himself confronted by a serious problem.

A man who has been going wrong may easily resolve that he will forsake his evil ways and make his crooked paths straight; but the resolve is not always easy of execution.

Not only has he formed habits that are likely to stick to him, but he has got into entanglements from which it seems impossible to free himself.

This was the predicament in which Ikey Jonas found himself, and his entanglements were so serious that it was going to be a difficult matter to cut himself loose.

He mounted his horse and rode away, pondering the matter deeply and in great perplexity.

His sensible conclusion was that the boldest and most straightforward way was the best, and that was the course which he determined to adopt.

The route he followed took him into the valley which had lately been twice visited by Aleck Sander, up to the head of that valley, and to the lone dug-out in the hollow.

There he found Zeke Streen and two other persons.

One of the two was Dave Strang, and the other was a rustler of ill-repute who was known as Whisky Bill.

Ikey dismounted, hitched his horse, and approached them, looking gloomy and out of temper.

"The very man we wanted to see!" exclaimed Streen. "We were jest talkin' about you, Ikey. We've got the best kind of a scheme fixed up for to-morrow night, and I was tellin' it to Dave, so's he could give it to you at Oro Fino to-night; but it's a heap better to have you here, as you kin be sure to git it straight and solid."

"No more schemes for me," moodily answered Ikey.

"What's that? Don't give us any guff, now. What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I am done with the sort of thing that I suppose you have been talking about, and that I have come here to tell you so."

"What's up, Ikey?" inquired Dave Strang. "Has the death of Prince Herman promoted you?"

"Well, it has made a big difference. I want to do the fair thing by you men, and so I have come to tell you just how the case stands with me. My governor has promised to pay me big wages to stay home and work on the ranch, and the offer is such a good one, taking it all together, that I've got to accept it, and I have accepted it."

"When does your slavery begin?"

"I have promised to begin work to-morrow and keep it up. So, you see, that counts me out of any more such schemes as you have been talking about."

"Not jest yet," replied Zeke Streen. "We will have somethin' to say about that. We've got a grip on you, my boy."

"What sort of a grip?"

"You ought to know without askin'. Do you allow that you kin use us when you want us, and give us the shake whenever you git ready, and all we have to do is jest to stand and take it? Not quite. Don't you know that we kin hurt you right bad if you go back on us?"

"I don't want to go back on you," protested Ikey. "I came here to do the fair and honorable thing by you, and ask you to let me off."

"That's a decent enough way of talkin', and we want you to be as good as your word—that's all. We will let you off after this little turn, and thus you'll be free and clear to stay with your pappy and be a good boy."

Ikey scowled and sulked at this talk; but there was no help for it. He was in the scrape, and it was not for him alone to say how he should get out of it.

"What is it to be?" he inquired. "What sort of a little turn do you mean?"

"Si Jonas has got a lot of nice cattle on his ranch yet, and we want a bunch of 'em, and we must have 'em to-morrow night."

"That's a little too hefty on the undersigned. Suppose you try some other scheme, Zeke. It would be too much like running off my own cattle."

"I reckon they ain't no more yourn than t'others were, and you were glad enough to have us help you git hold of them."

"But things have changed, and I shall have to take care of those cattle now."

"Things hain't changed with us. You may have plenty of money; but we are in about as bad a fix as ever. Now that you are to take keer o' the cattle, that makes things dead sure for us, and we kin work that little turn as easy as rollin' off a log."

"That's so, Ikey," put in Dave Strang. "There won't be the slightest chance to get caught, or I wouldn't go in. I am getting tired of the business, or the risk of it, and want to quit as well as you do; but there can't be any risk now, and Zeke says that this once shall be the last time."

"Only once more," affirmed Zeke. "That winds up the business, and we will all be free and clear. Jack Halsey is loose now, and if anybody should happen to see you, which ain't a bit likely, the run would be laid onto the Halseys."

"I will go in once more, then," was Ikey's final decision, "with the distinct understanding that this is to be the wind-up of the whole business, and I will arrange matters at the ranch so that the work can be done quietly and without any trouble."

Having settled this point, the young man mounted his horse, and with Dave Strang rode off toward Oro Fino, to make the most of his last day of liberty.

He had discovered that it was no easy matter to clear himself from the tangle into which his crooked ways had led him, and the discovery was not a pleasant one, and there was still another matter with which trouble might be connected.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A WOMAN SCORNE.

Of the more or less respectable young women—generally less it must be admitted—who aired their husky voices and exhibited their too visible figures in the Emporia Music Hall at Oro

Fino, Kitty Delavergne (that was her professional name, anyhow) was one of the brightest and smartest, if not one of the prettiest.

She was smart enough to cause it to be believed that the greater part of her good looks was not due to artificial appliances, and the same could not be said of all the others.

Therefore Kitty had many admirers, whom she naturally regarded according to their liberality, and foremost in her transient affections was Ikey Jonas, whose purse-strings she had managed to unloose with the greatest ease.

Indeed, a large portion of the young man's extravagance and consequent indebtedness was caused by her, and when he had sworn off from gambling he perceived that the stoppage of that outlet for his cash had only increased Kitty's demands upon him.

Solomon had truly described her kind as the daughters of the horse-leech, whose only cry is "Give!"

This young woman—generally spoken of as a girl—was one of the ties binding him to his past life which Ikey Jonas had determined to cut, and he imagined that the cutting would be an easy operation.

All he had to do was to inform her that she need no longer consider him as an acquaintance, or merely to keep away from her without giving her that information, and her mercenary nature would at once accept the decision and fasten itself upon some other victim.

This would be a vastly easier matter than cutting loose from his associates at the hole in the hills.

It is to be supposed that he had never read the line which would have assured him that "hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

At Oro Fino he and Dave Strang "went around" in the manner to which they were accustomed, fulfilling Ikey's intention of having "a good time" on the last day of his liberty.

At night he visited the Emporia, where he admired the antics of Kitty Delavergne, and was duly smiled at by her from the stage.

After the performance he met her, and accompanied her, by her invitation, to her lodging.

By that time he had absorbed a sufficient quantity of stimulating fluids to cause him to consider himself nerved up to speak his mind plainly—in fact, enough to render him rather reckless.

She opened the engagement immediately by a demand that gave him a chance.

"Ikey, I want you to give me fifty dollars."

"Fifty dollars!" he exclaimed. "What do you want to do with so much money?"

"I am tired of this hole, and I want to skip out and go to Denver."

"Seems to me that you ought to have enough to go on."

"But I hain't got enough to go on, and you must give me fifty dollars."

"I have not that much money about me, and wouldn't give it to you if I had it."

"You will bring me fifty dollars to-morrow, then."

"Indeed I will not, and you will never get another dollar from me."

The girl saw that there was "something up," and looked at him as if she meant to find out what it was.

"What is the matter with you?" she demanded.

"It is just this. I am done with you, and am going to stay at home and go to work. After this you and I are two."

"You don't mean it. You can't drop me like that."

"I do mean it," he declared, "and I have dropped you for good and all. You can just bet your lovely life on that."

Perhaps it would have been better for him if he had tried to make his declaration somewhat pleasanter and less emphatic—if he had pleaded poverty for the harsh command of a cruel father—if he had begged off without being so bitter about it; but he did as his instinct led him to do.

His style was quite offensive to Miss Delavergne, who flew into a passion, and, to use an expression which is often heard in police courts, "called him out of his name."

Whereupon Mr. Isaac Jonas fired up, and he gave her cheek such a slap as brought genuine color into it.

She stepped back, and her face turned as pale as the rouge would allow it to become, and she spoke to him calmly but very vindictively.

"You will be sorry for that. You shall pay for it, as sure as I am a living woman. You will be sorry enough, before I am done with you, that you ever struck me a blow. I am glad that you are going, and the sooner the better. Get out of here, now!"

Ikey Jonas did get out immediately.

He went to the nearest saloon, provided himself with a flask of whisky, and rode home, feeling much depressed in spirits, and wishing that the Delavergne episode had terminated more pleasantly.

Zeke Streen also had a little matter of business to which he wished to attend before the

winding up which had been decided on at his dug-out.

As soon as the two young men had left him, he brought out his horse from its hiding-place, and rode away to the Jonas Ranch.

He found Simon Jonas in a very ill humor, surly, and disposed to be gruff and short of speech; but that was a matter of no consequence to the visitor, who demanded a private interview, and it was instantly accorded him, as his business with Jonas was never matter for the general ear.

"What do you want now?" gruffly inquired the ranchman.

"Money," was the short and plain reply.

"It is only a little while since I gave you some, and I ought not to have given you a dollar then. There has been too much of that sort of thing, and I must end it."

"Give me fifty dollars now, and that will end it. I am going to Denver, and I don't mean to come back to this part of the country again."

It may be stated as a coincidence that fifty dollars was the exact sum which Kitty Delavergne demanded from Simon Jonas's son, and that she, also, was going to Denver; but that may have been merely an accidental coincidence.

"You may mean that now, Zeke Streen; but, as soon as you get short of money, you will be coming back here and drawing on me for more."

"Not this time. This is a go. Give me fifty dollars, and I will go to Denver and stay away."

"You may go to Denver or to the devil, for all I care; but you won't get a dollar more of my money."

"You have said that before now, Si Jonas, and it never counted."

"It counts now. Once for all, you won't get another dollar of my money."

"You don't mean that," insisted Streen.

"I do mean it. I am done with you."

"I reckon you know what's likely to happen if you go back on me."

"If you mean the Tom Halsey business, I don't care what happens. You may blow as much as you please, and you can't hurt me. Everybody will believe my word against the story of such a vagabond as you."

"Go ahead and call names. Pile 'em up as big and nasty as you please. They'll all be counted ag'inst you."

"I don't care what is counted against me. I have been bothered by you too long, and I won't have any more of it."

"The Tom Halsey job ain't the only thing I can bring up to hurt you, Si Jonas. If you go back on me now, I've got somethin' waitin' for you that'll jest knock you cold."

"Knock away, then. I don't mind your bark, and am not afraid of your bite. I want you to understand, once for all, now and forever, that I am done with you."

"I ain't done with you, though, and you'll be sorry enough fur this afore you're many days older. When you git hurt right bad, remember Zeke Streen."

"Oh, get out!"

Zeke Streen did get out, and he registered a final vow of vengeance as he mounted his horse and rode off toward Oro Fino.

He did not happen to meet Ikey Jonas on the way, and it was late at night when he got into town.

After attending to the important duty of irrigating his interior, he sought an interview with Kitty Delavergne, whom he met shortly after the termination of her stormy set-to with Ikey Jonas.

Aleck Sander saw the man come into town, and noted where he went.

He did not want Zeke Streen then, as he was not yet ready for him, but wanted to know what he was about.

The next morning, as Smart Aleck was walking near the lodging occupied by Kitty Delavergne, that young lady stepped out and spoke to him.

"You are the very man I was wanting to see," said she. "Come in here; I've got something to say to you."

"No, thank you," answered the detective. "Not any in mine, if you please."

"What do you take me for?" she indignantly rejoined. "It is business that I want to speak to you about."

"Not my kind of business."

"That's just what it is. Are you still hunting those cattle-thieves?"

Smart Aleck immediately connected this question with the recent meeting of Zeke Streen and the young woman, and he changed his tone at once.

"Of course I am. Can you tell me anything about them?"

"Yes, but you must come in here, out of the street. You may be ashamed to be seen with me; but I am afraid to be seen with you."

They stepped inside, and she closed the door.

"You came near missing a good thing by making a fool of yourself," said she, "as I came near letting you go."

"I ask your pardon. I was thinking of a matter of business just then, and it made me cross

to be interrupted. What have you got to tell me?"

"If you want to ketch those cattle-thieves, you must go to Simon Jonas's Ranch to-night, and keep your eyes open. I reckon you know where to go and when to get there."

"Are you sure that you are giving me the straight tip?"

"I am sure that they are going to run off some of Simon Jonas's cattle to-night."

"Who told you this—Zeke Streen?"

She started, and her eyes opened wide.

"Zeke hain't got nothin' to do with it," she answered. "He only happened to hear about it."

"All right. How much do you want for the news, young lady?"

"Nothin' at all. I'll pay myself."

The detective would have been willing to pay well for this valuable information, and he naturally wondered why the girl had been willing to give it to him for nothing.

Of course she wanted to hurt somebody; but whom was she hitting?

Though she practically admitted that her knowledge of the fact had been derived from Zeke Streen, it was evident that she did not wish or expect him to be included in the capture.

Well, whoever she might be striking at, Smart Aleck had the satisfaction of holding the information, and he meant to use it.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

GONE A COURTING.

HORACE EXTON was more than elated by the result of the blast which had proved so disastrous to some others, and which, while defending his title to the Hole in the Ground, had at the same time largely increased the value of the property.

He was overjoyed, and at once took vigorous measures for the development of the mine, and to secure himself and his partner in its possession.

The men, whom he at once engaged, were not only more than enough for the mining work at that time, but were such as would be both willing and able to fight for their employers, if they should be called upon to do so.

When he had also engaged Ralph Harkness to act as foreman, the young Englishman believed that both the present and future of the Hole in the Ground were assured.

This assurance became stronger and brighter when the debris of the explosion was cleared out of the tunnel, and the real character of the vein that had been struck was made visible.

The ore was so rich, and the promise was so good, that the partners were already fairly entitled to consider themselves wealthy men.

If capital should be needed to work it, there would be plenty to be had for the asking.

Carl Klein partook of his partner's elation, and the splendid luck of the Hole in the Ground had a most beneficial effect upon him.

The sight of the specimens of ore that were brought to him acted like a tonic, his eager desire to get out and go to work hastening his recovery, and he improved so rapidly that Exton was not afraid to leave his partner to the care of Ralph Harkness and the others, while he went away to look after a matter of personal interest.

That matter of personal interest was closely connected with Victoria Halsey, and it was for the purpose of visiting her that he left the Hole in the Ground, as soon as he had got everything in working order, and there could no longer be any doubt of the value of the mine.

When he first made his declaration of love to her, though a fortune had been in sight for him, the prospect had vanished, and his disappointment was so great that he did not feel justified in pressing his suit again; but the recent stroke of luck had brought new hope and a fresh determination to succeed in that quarter.

It was true that she had not admitted to him that she loved him; but he believed that she had a strong leaning that way, and she had based her refusal of his offer upon her own condition, rather than upon any personal objection to her suitor.

In Exton's opinion she was entirely too sensitive concerning the stigma that was supposed to attach to her father's death, and he hoped to overcome her sensitiveness and persuade her to make him happy and to share his good fortune.

When he rode up to the house at Small Hopes Ranch on this occasion, arrayed in his best, and looking bright and handsome, his arrival was witnessed from the windows by Victoria and her mother.

"There is Mr. Exton," said the old lady, "and it is a sure thing that he has come a-courting."

"I hope not," answered Victoria, with a sigh.

"I don't know why you should hope not, when you ought to be glad of a chance to encourage him. He is a fine young fellow, in my opinion, and Jack says that he has now struck it rich for sure, and I don't see where you could look for a better match."

Victoria answered with another sigh.

Her mother had not touched the root of the matter. The question was not whether the

Englishman was a good match for her, but whether she would be a suitable match for him.

Mrs. Halsey, having fired her shot, retired in good order, and left a clear field for the besieger.

When Exton came in he found the lady of his love looking rather sad and disconsolate, and he at once endeavored to cheer her up by giving her a glowing account of his good luck and the bright prospects of the Hole in the Ground Mine.

As he had begun in just that way when he pressed his suit before, she sought to guide his talk so as to prevent it from touching the point which it had reached on the previous occasion.

After congratulating him upon his good fortune, she compelled him to speak of the death of Herman Jonas, to tell her of his partner's illness and recovery, and to enter into details concerning the quality of the ore and his arrangements for working the mine.

Exton stood this very well for a while; but his patience finally became exhausted, and he made a bold break for the subject that was nearest his heart.

"That is all very well," said he, "and I hope it is interesting to you; but it is not what I came here to talk about, and I must say what I want to say now, as I suppose you will never let me have my own way at all after we are married."

This astonishing statement crushed her, and she could not utter a word.

"We will have plenty of time hereafter to talk about the mine and other matters," he continued. "I spoke about my good luck to-day only because I came here to ask you to share it with me, and I give you fair warning that I mean to keep on asking you until I get your consent."

Victoria braced herself up to repel this determined attack.

"I thought we had made an end of that," said she. "I told you that you must never again speak to me of marriage."

"I remember that you said something of the sort, and you must admit that I have kept silence for quite a long time; but never is too long a day for me. I remember, too, that you made an objection which was really not a good one."

"I tell you plainly that you must not marry the daughter of a man who was hung for cattle-stealing."

"And I tell you plainly that nobody shall dictate to me whom I must or must not marry. You were not hung for cattle-stealing."

"But I might be."

"Not being a cattle-thief, I don't see—"

"I am a cattle-thief!"

"Miss Halsey!"

"You compel me to tell you the truth, and I must bring Jack in. We have both stolen cattle."

"Then Aleck Sander must be a bigger fool than I had supposed him to be."

"I do not mean to say that Jack and I are responsible for all the cattle-stealing that has been done in this district, or for a large part of it; but we have run off cattle from the Jonas Ranch three times. We have vowed to avenge the wrongful death of our father upon his murderers, and we saw no way to strike at Simon Jonas but through his pocket. I proposed to burn his house, but Jack preferred to run off his cattle. After three attempts we tired of it, and since we quit the business some other thieves have taken it up and are running it under the name of our firm. Now, Mr. Exton, I have told you the plain truth, and you will believe that I am not fit to be the wife of an honest man."

She was contradicted by her lover's smile, as well as by his words.

"I will tell you what I do believe," said he. "I believe, Victoria, that your father was innocent, and that his name will yet be cleared. I believe that you and Jack were quite excusable, though of course not justified, in the measures you took against Simon Jonas, and that the capture of the scoundrels who have been copying you for profit will wipe off all suspicion from you both. I believe, too, that I am going to make you my wife."

"Without my consent?"

"With it. Don't you love me?"

"Now, Mr. Exton, is that fair?"

"All's fair in love, and I assure you that I love you with all my heart and strength. As you are in a confessing mood, you may as well make a clean breast of it and confess that you are fond of me. What do you say?"

"Do not urge me to say anything now, I beg you. If my father's name could be cleared, and if that suspicion you speak of could be removed from Jack and me—"

"That make would matters easier for you, and it shall be done, with the good help of Aleck Sander. By Jove! there's the man now, and Jack is with him. Something must have happened. Wonder what it is."

Exton's curiosity was soon satisfied.

Aleck Sander came in with Jack, and they both seemed glad to meet him, though it may be supposed that appearances looked somewhat suspicious to the detective.

"I am very glad to find you here, Mr. Exton," said Smart Aleck. "You are just the man we were both wanting to see. Miss Halsey, you must excuse me if I am in a hurry and talk business."

"It is easy to excuse you, Mr. Sander, as you have been so kind to us," she answered. "Am I in the way here?"

"Not at all. I merely want to say to Exton that we hope to catch those cattle-thieves to-night, and will want his help."

"You shall have it, and I am glad that you give me the chance," said the Englishman. "Tell me what you want me to do, and I will put in the best work I am capable of."

"I am quite sure that they are going to make a raid to-night, and I know where they are to start from and where they are to bring up. Jack and I will look after the first point, and I have engaged Pete Jackson and several good men to attend to the other, and I want you to take command of that party."

"All right. When shall we start?"

"There is plenty of time. Jack says that we may have our supper here, and then we will get off."

CHAPTER XXXV.

WATCHING AND TRAILING.

CONSIDERABLY before the time when they supposed it to be necessary for them to be there, Aleck Sander and Jack Halsey were on the Jonas Ranch, waiting for their prey.

Previous experience had made both well acquainted with the ground, and they knew just where to go and where to lie in wait.

The detective had deemed it best to have Jack as a companion, not only because of his knowledge of the country and for his valuable assistance in case of a possible collision, but because he would be wanted as a witness if an early capture should become necessary.

It was Sander's intention, however, merely to follow the raiders to their hiding-place if, as he believed, their destination should prove to be the hollow in the hills which he had discovered.

The night was pretty much such a night as that which had witnessed Smart Aleck's first pursuit of the raiders, when he had, as he supposed at the time, chased the woman over the edge of the cliff—a cloudy night, with frequent glimpses of moonlight.

It seemed to be a favorable night both for the purpose of the raiders and for those of their would-be captors.

The latter were well-mounted on this occasion, the detective having secured a horse of speed and endurance, and Jack Halsey riding his bay, so that if the still-hunt should be turned into a pursuit, they would not find themselves at a disadvantage.

They had brought their rifles, too, as well as their revolvers, and considered themselves prepared for any emergency.

All that they then required was a chance at the cattle-thieves, and this time Aleck Sander was certain, whoever they might prove to be, that Jack Halsey would not be one of them.

After carefully concealing their horses near at hand, and covering their heads so that they would not be likely to make a noise, they hid in the brush and waited.

They both knew, as well as Zeke Streen knew, that Simon Jonas had some fine cattle left—the best of his stock, in fact—and it was reasonable to suppose that the raid was to be made upon that lot.

So they stationed themselves near the spot where the cattle-thieves were expected to begin their work, and at a little distance from each other, the understanding being that as soon as one of them made a discovery he should move toward the other and make it known, so that they could act together.

The business in which they were engaged could hardly have been conducted to their better satisfaction if they had managed it all themselves.

At an unusually and unexpectedly early hour the raiders put in an appearance.

They were discovered at nearly the same moment by both the watchers, who moved toward each other quickly and quietly, meeting at a point where they happened to get a good view of the subsequent proceedings, as well as to overhear some interesting conversation.

They came riding up without any attempt at secrecy, and their movements were generally characterized by an absence of precaution, as if they considered themselves entirely free from molestation or observation.

The moon, shining out as they rode near the watchers, gave the latter a good view of them, and it was seen that they were two in number, apparently a man and a woman, one dressed as Jack Halsey had been on the occasion of the first raid that is chronicled here, and the other quite a close counterpart of his sister, so far, at least, as apparel goes.

One of them rode a fine bay horse, and the other a black, making the resemblance so nearly complete as to extort from Jack a low exclamation of astonishment.

"You see how it is now," whispered the detective. "Is it any wonder that people accused you and your sister?"

"We could have accused ourselves. I say, Sander, this is the meanest trick that could possibly be played. It is bad enough to steal cattle, without taking so much pains to saddle the job upon other people's shoulders. I would like to shoot those scamps down right now, without another word."

"That is not our game, my boy. You promised to be patient and obey my orders, and I expect you to do so."

The two raiders dismounted from their horses, and nitched them, going about their work very leisurely, and evidently anticipating no sort of interruption.

"Confound these togs!" exclaimed the man who was dressed as a female. "They are always in the way. I don't see the use of wearing them to-night, anyhow."

"We can't always tell," answered the other.

"That's so. If anybody should happen to see us as we go along, it would be a sure thing that those scamps of Halseys had been cattle-stealing again."

"Did you know the voice of that she-fraud, Jack?" whispered the detective.

"I thought I did."

"And I am sure that I did."

"He is just about the last man I would have expected to find mixed up in this business."

"It's not so with me. This merely confirms the suspicions I have had for some time. Hush! ah! he is shooting off his mouth again."

"Give me a pull at your whisky bottle, Dave," said the person referred to, "and we will get through with this job as quick as we can. There can't be any trouble about it, as the critters we want are bunched together. I attended to that to-day, and had them put in a little corral by themselves. So we will have nothing to do but drive them off and deliver them to Zeke."

As the flask was passed between the two raiders, Jack Halsey fingered his rifle nervously.

"I'm half-crazy to shoot that dirty rascal!" he muttered.

"Don't be so foolish," whispered the detective. "We can do much better than to shoot him, and he will be worth a great deal more to us alive than dead. What we have to do is to keep quiet, watch the whole business, and see it through to the finish."

The little corral which was spoken of in their hearing had already been noticed by the watchers, who had expected the cattle confined there to be the objects of the raid, and the point at which they had met was so near to it that they could easily see everything that went on there.

The remaining performance was simple enough.

The raiders quietly and methodically opened the corral, brought out the steers, mounted, and drove them slowly away.

Aleck Sander and Jack Halsey waited until they had got a good start, and then brought out their horses, mounted, and took up the trail.

It was easy to follow it, especially as they knew, or believed they knew, the point for which the raiders would strike, and the route they would probably take.

In this Jack Halsey took the lead, as he declared that his bay horse could hold to a cattle-trail through the darkest night.

The bay was unshod, and Jack said that he guided himself by the feel of the ground.

Thus the only thing necessary for the pursuers was to keep at a reasonable distance behind the raiders, so that the latter should not discover them and make a break that would disarrange the plans of both parties.

Fortunately for them, and mainly owing to the caution with which they continued the pursuit, nothing of the kind occurred.

The raiders kept moving forward leisurely, through open and wooded ground, and on into the hills, driving the cattle without difficulty, talking as they went, and occasionally taking a drink, and their pursuers came warily behind them, halting when they drew too near, but always sticking close to the trail.

When they had got fairly into the hills, and were following the route which the detective had gone over twice before on somewhat similar errands, something happened that surprised him, though his companion did not seem to consider it anything out of the way.

The bay horse, in pursuance of his duty as trailer, suddenly turned aside from the route into a ravine at the left, and Jack Halsey made no effort to stop him.

"What does this mean?" demanded Smart Aleck. "This is not the way to the valley. We have to go three or four miles further before we turn off."

"This is one way, though it is a rather rough one," answered Jack. "It leads right down into the valley, and cuts off the distance you speak of. Come on! They have gone down this way, or Bruno would never have struck in here."

Aleck Sander followed his leader, and soon the trail of the cattle was evident to him.

"You seem to be well posted in the ins and outs of these hills," he observed.

"I ought to be," answered Jack. "This is

the chute I took the night you drove Victoria over the cliff."

"The night I did what?"

"Didn't you know that it was Vic and me that you chased that time?"

"I had settled it in my mind that it could not have been you."

"But it was. I supposed that Vic had explained the business to you. That made the third time we had run off Simon Jonas's cattle, or tried to—not because we wanted the cattle, but because we wanted to hurt him, and that was the only way we saw of getting at him. We quit it after then. Vic contrived that scheme for throwing you off the track, and she worked it splendidly."

"You don't mean to tell me that your sister rode her horse over that cliff?"

"Not quite; but she killed a fine horse. She jumped off just as the mare went over, and hid in a hole at the edge until you cleared out. Then she climbed down to the bottom. I went down here, and met her in the valley, and Vic mounted behind me, and we rode away home."

"What black mare was it that I found at your place the next day?"

"That was Myra, Nettie's mate. Vic was all broke up by the death of Nettie, and we agreed that we wouldn't try to worry Simon Jonas in that way any more."

"I am glad that you quit the business, Jack, and I am glad that you have told me the truth about it. Well, this is a short cut, and no mistake."

When they got down into the valley, they perceived that they would have to proceed more slowly and with more caution, as the cattle and their drivers were but a little way ahead, and the moon was then shining in a clear sky.

As there could then be no doubt of their destination, they lagged behind, and when they again started ahead they were careful to keep in the timber and under the shadow of the cliff at their left.

Then they traveled on until they came in sight of the hollow at the head of the valley, and saw the men they had been following about to disappear within the opening there.

The detective put a whistle to his mouth, and sounded a shrill call, which had been agreed upon as the signal for his aids.

Instantly the two raiders turned and faced their pursuers, and Aleck Sander and Jack Halsey spurred their horses forward.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CLOSING IN.

BEFORE setting out for the Jonas Ranch, the detective and Jack Halsey had accompanied Horace Exton to the rendezvous at which they were to meet their allies, leaving Aleck Halsey to take care of Small Hopes.

They were already there: big Pete Jackson and half a dozen of his best men, quite enough for the business in hand.

Indeed, it might have been objected to the force that it was larger than was necessary for the capture of a pair of cattle-thieves; but it was deemed best to err on the safe side, and have too many men rather than too few.

Zeke Streen, added to the pair of cattle-thieves, would make three, and they might have other confederates, of whom the detective and his friends knew nothing.

As it was the desire to capture the entire party, if possible, without any fighting, it was of course proper to make an imposing show of force, in the hope of compelling a peaceful surrender.

Pete Jackson and his followers were found to be ready and eager for the task, the big ranchman especially so, as he believed from what Smart Aleck had told him that he was likely not only to capture the scoundrels who had been stealing his cattle, but to clear the reputations of Jack Halsey and his sister.

As Jack was there among them, and was about to become one of the capturing force under the eye of the leader, nothing was clearer than the fact that he could not be a cattle-thief on that occasion.

Sam Hickey, one of Pete Jackson's herders, professed to be well acquainted with the locality which Aleck Sander described, and proposed to relieve him of any further responsibility in that quarter; but the detective preferred to visit it and post the party himself.

So the services of Sam Hickey were accepted to guide the party to the spot by the nearest route, and they all set off together.

Pete Jackson was particularly anxious to effect the capture of Zeke Streen without damaging that handsome specimen of humanity, and he carefully impressed this desire upon his followers.

"If that cuss shows fight, boys," said he—"and he is durned apt to do it—don't shoot him if you can help it, because I want to take him alive, and I'm bound to have him right side up and in good order."

Sam Hickey led the party by a tolerably easy route to the hills at the head of the valley, and there they soon struck into the trail which Smart Aleck had followed from the Jackson ranch.

The detective directed the party to conceal

themselves near that trail, so that they could look down into the hollow, but to keep themselves carefully out of sight and hearing of the dug-out there.

He and Jack Halsey would go and get on the trail of the cattle thieves, following it up to the head of the valley, and on their arrival he would sound a whistle, loud enough to be heard by his friends, which should be the signal for them to pounce down and make the capture.

If he should discover that he had been deceived about the raid that night, he and Jack would return to the hollow, and there they would pick up Zeke Streen and endeavor to squeeze the truth out of him.

Having arranged these matters to his satisfaction, he rode away with Jack, who was to take him by the shortest route to the Jonas Ranch.

The men who were left to watch the hole in the hills had a quiet and monotonous vigil.

As the supply of whisky for the expedition had been, by Pete Jackson's orders, strictly limited, and as they could not make a light by which to play cards, there was nothing for them to do but sit around and "swap lies."

The big ranchman beguiled a portion of the time by repeating to Horace Exton the story which he had told Aleck Sander, and he found the Englishman more than willing to believe the innocence of Victoria's father.

It was agreed between them that Zeke Streen had acted as the tool of Simon Jonas in compassing Jack Halsey's death, and that the night's work, if it should prove to be successful, would be more useful in furnishing a hold upon him than in the capture of the cattle-thieves.

After a while the moon came out above the mountain tops, and the employments of the party were a little more diversified.

Pete Jackson got into a position which enabled him, without being observed from below, to see what was going on in the hollow, if anything should happen to be going on there.

There was no light in the dug-out, but that did not argue the absence of Zeke Streen, as he was not a reading man, and he could not play cards alone, and he could easily find the way to his mouth with a bottle in the dark.

In the course of time there came forth from the dug-out a man whom the ranchman recognized as Zeke Streen, and he notified Exton of that fact.

The man yawned and stretched as if he had just awoke from sleep, looked about the hollow and up at the hills, walked down to the little pass that opened into the valley, and looked out there, and finally went back into the dug-out.

After a while he came out again, and again walked down to the opening, where he waited until he was joined by two men who had come riding up the valley, and he led them to the dug-out, where they dismounted, hitched their horses, and followed him into the hovel.

As neither of the new-comers answered to the description of the riders who had been seen, the conclusion was that the party of cattle-thieves would number five men.

Another conclusion was that the work for which they were waiting was surely expected to be done that night, and therefore the mission of the watchers was likely to be successful.

Patently they waited until Streen and his companions emerged from the dug-out, where they had probably been refreshing themselves.

They went down to the opening, and busied themselves there with some logs and poles, as if they were preparing to close up the entrance after the arrival of the cattle.

Pete Jackson, in his eagerness to see what they were at, dislodged a stone that went tumbling down the hillside into the hollow.

Zeke Streen snatched up his rifle, and hastened to the spot where the stone had fallen, followed more slowly by the other two men.

He looked up at the hillside, but nothing further occurred to arouse his suspicions, and then held a brief consultation with his companions.

It was not at all likely that the stone had fallen of its own accord; but it might have been dislodged by some wild animal, and that was the conclusion at which the three men doubtless arrived, as they went back to their occupation at the opening.

"You will have to get away from there, Mr. Jackson, or be a great deal more careful," observed the Englishman. "We can't afford to alarm those fellows."

The ranchman was of the same opinion, and he withdrew carefully from his point of observation.

Sam Hickey secured a position from which he could look down into the valley, and made arrangements for informing his companions of what he should happen to see in that direction.

In the course of time the patient waiting of the party was rewarded.

Sam Hickey from his lookout passed down the news that a number of cattle were coming up the valley, driven by two persons.

A little later he sent the information that the cattle and their drivers were followed at a little distance by two men.

Horace Exton, acting under the instructions given by Aleck Sander, then took command of the party.

He ordered all to assemble on the trail that led down from the hills, with the exception of Sam Hickey, who was to wave his hat when the cattle came near the hollow, and then come down to join his comrades.

The men at the trail held themselves in readiness to rush down, and the foremost of them improved the time by creeping forward to more advanced positions, so as to get a good start.

Soon the hat was waved in the moonlight, and directly afterward the call of Smart Aleck's whistle rung out loud and shrill.

Exton and his men almost tumbled down the steep trail in their eagerness to reach the bottom of the hollow.

When the detective and Jack Halsey saw the cattle-thieves turn at the head of the valley, they charged them at once, calling upon them to surrender.

The one in female attire turned again, and fled into the hollow; but the other stood his ground, jumping from his horse, sheltering himself behind a rock, and opening fire upon his pursuers.

Jack Halsey made a half-circuit with his horse, Indian-fashion, so as to get the skulker within range, and a shot from his unerring rifle quieted matters in that quarter.

Aleck Sander rode on into the hollow after the fugitive, and was followed directly by his companions.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ZEKE STREEN'S CONFESSION.

ZEKE STREEN and his comrades, by looking out at the opening which led into the valley, had perceived the approach of the cattle and their drivers, but had seen nothing of the two men who followed stealthily in the rear.

When the cattle were near the opening, they drew back into the hollow, to leave room for the stolen stock to pass in.

Something seemed to be the matter with Streen, who muttered to himself strangely:

"This is mighty queer—durned if I understand it a bit," was the purport of his mutterings; but his comrades paid no attention to him, doubtless supposing that he had devoted himself too closely to the whisky bottle.

They were not far wrong about that; but there was something else the matter with Zeke.

He was wondering how it was that Ike Jonas had escaped the trap which he laid for him.

Either Kitty Delavergne had repented of her determination to "smash" the young Jew, or Aleck Sander had refused to believe her story, or he had failed to find the cattle-thieves.

That was the way Zeke Streen figured it up; but he was wrong all around.

The first intimation that he and his comrades had of the presence there of any persons besides their own crowd was given them by Smart Aleck's whistle.

They hastened toward the entrance, but it was blocked up by the gang of cattle, and they found it impossible to get out then, or to understand what was the matter.

Then came the rush down the steep trail, followed immediately by the noise of firing with-out.

It was evident to them that they were in a trap, though they could not yet comprehend its nature and extent.

When Exton and his friends reached the foot of the trail, they found themselves separated from the men they desired to reach by the cattle, which had been frightened by the firing and the presence of men, and were hurrying toward the upper end of the hollow.

This gave Streen and his party a chance to prepare for defense or retreat; but their surprise at the unexpected attack was such that they did not properly avail themselves of that chance.

Ike Jonas rode in after the cattle, and Aleck Sander followed him closely, getting into the hollow just as Exton and the others found an opportunity to charge upon the men whom they wished to capture.

Thus the four remaining cattle-thieves found themselves blocked in on all sides but one, and on that side there was no chance for them to escape.

"Don't kill Zeke Streen!" was Pete Jackson's order to his men. "Whoever goes, we must take him alive."

"Surrender!" shouted the Englishman as he ran across the hollow. "Surrender, and none of you will be hurt!"

Notwithstanding this peaceful summons, firing began, and revolvers cracked several times before the opposing parties fairly got together.

Whisky Bill, Zeke Streen's side partner, was shot down by one of Jackson's cowboys, and the big ranchman was slightly wounded.

Zeke himself, whose shot had hit Pete Jackson, was about to fire again, with better aim, when he was seized from behind by Horace Exton, who had executed a rapid and successful movement to his rear.

Aleck Sander's object from the start had been Ike Jonas, and he did not for a moment lose sight of that object.

As the young Jew was about to dismount, the detective ranged up at his side, and detained

him by a strong grasp of his collar and a revolver at his ear.

Zeke Streen was easily subdued, and his remaining comrade was glad to be allowed to surrender at discretion.

A more crestfallen and disconsolate object than Isaac Jonas could not easily have been found in all that section of country.

When he found himself captured in his disguise, his purpose made plain, his friends caught or killed, and himself exposed as a cattle-thief, liable to the pains and penalties of his crime, he broke down and blubbered, and had not a word to say for himself.

To add to his discomfiture, he found himself confronted by Jack Halsey, who had been an agent in his detection and capture.

"Who is that man out there, Jack?" inquired Sander, who had dismounted without relaxing his grasp upon his prisoner.

"It is Dave Strang," answered the young ranchman.

"Is he dead?"

"As dead as Julius Cæsar, and I am sorry for it, too."

"Perhaps he is better off. We have got this one alive anyhow, and he has been caught in the act, and the proof is clear that he is one of the rascals who have been stealing cattle in this region for a long time."

"We didn't begin it," blubbered Ike. "Others had been at it before we started in, and we only followed in their tracks."

"That's a likely yarn," declared Pete Jackson, who had been gloating over the capture. "Tell it to the coyotes, as you won't find any men to believe it. You have made a mean business ever so much meaner by fixing yourselves up so as to put the blame on two decent people, and one of them a lady."

"Hain't you better have that arm of yours tied up, Mr. Jackson?" inquired Sander. "You are bleeding like a stuck pig."

"I don't care a cuss about that, since we've got this thing straightened out, and there is one other piece of business that we must attend to."

He allowed Exton, however, to remove his coat-sleeve, and tie up his arm so as to stop the bleeding, and was then ready for further service.

Aleck Sander secured Ike Jonas and the man who had surrendered, by tying their hands behind their backs, and left them in charge of two of the cowboys.

Then he prepared to attend to the "other piece of business" of which Pete Jackson had spoken, and which the ranchman was eager to proceed with.

No less eager were Jack Halsey and Horace Exton; indeed, the anxiety of both of them just then was intense.

It is easy to infer that the business in question was connected with Zeke Streen.

To him Smart Aleck advanced, carrying a lasso, and the others gathered about them.

Zeke Streen, who was seated on the ground, with his hands tied, so that he could not escape or resist, looked at them doggedly.

"How do you like the looks of this, old man?" inquired the detective, as he held up the lasso suggestively.

"That hain't got nothin' to do with me," answered the captive. "You can't prove that I stole any cattle."

"You are as much mistaken there, my friend, as if you had swallowed your head. Of that we have all the proof we want, enough to satisfy every man in this party. Your partner over there has confessed, and you know that Ike Jonas will confess whenever we want him to. What's the use of talking?"

"I ain't talking."

"That's right. Let me do the talking. We are going to make it as easy for you as we can, and give you the choice of two things—one a hard thing, and the other a soft thing."

"Talk it right out, then."

"Which would suit you the best, Ike Streen, to swing at the end of this rope from one of these trees, or do something else and be free to go where you please?"

"What's the somethin' else?"

"We want you to tell us the truth about the death of Tom Halsey—how Simon Jonas hired you to draw that man into a trap, and how the scheme was worked. We know most of the points, and I heard you talking to Simon Jonas about it lately; but we want to get all the facts from you, clear and square. Now you understand me. What will you do?"

"Well, boss," answered Streen, as his face lighted up, "is it sart'in that if I tell you all about that thar busness straight, I'll be let to go, and won't be bothered no more?"

"Yes, that is a sure thing."

"Sart'in as death and judgment?"

"It is as sure as anything can be in this world. I tell you so, and Pete Jackson and the rest of these men will back me up in what I say."

"Then I'll give it to you, and 'll be durned glad o' the chances. Jest you bring Ike Jonas here."

"What do you want of Ike Jonas?"

"I want him to know who is givin' this thing away, and how it's done."

Ike Jonas was added to the group, and Streen proceeded to tell the story of the betrayal and death of Tom Halsey.

Part of it was already known, and the remainder had been pretty well guessed out by the detective and his friends.

Zeke Streen, according to his own account, being badly broken up financially, and resting under the suspicion of being a cattle-thief, was taken hold of by Simon Jonas as a fit person to aid him in a plan he had formed for getting rid of Tom Halsey.

The plan, as explained to his confederate by the Jew ranchman, involved a game of cattle-stealing, and Halsey was to be "roped into" it.

This plan, together with the price to be paid for the job, suited Zeke Streen, and it was carried out carefully and successfully.

Selecting a night when it was known that Tom Halsey would be passing along a certain road at a certain hour, Zeke was to pick up a bunch of cattle that did not belong to him, and was to drive them along that road.

When he met Halsey, he was to represent the cattle as a lot which he had purchased, pretend to have difficulty, and ask for help.

It was reasonably supposed that Tom, being of an obliging disposition, would readily consent to help him.

Simon Jonas was to call out the Vigilantes whom he had helped to organize, for an expedition in search of cattle-thieves, and was to conceal them at a point agreed upon, which the cattle were expected to pass.

Before reaching that point, Streen was to make a pretext for stopping, and let Halsey go on alone with the cattle and fall into the trap that had been set for him.

The plan worked to perfection, and the death of Tom Halsey occurred as Pete Jackson described it to the detective.

Zeke Streen received from Simon Jonas the price of his villainy, and kept his promise of leaving that part of the country, but finally returned to draw on his employer for more money, greatly to the disgust of the latter.

Ike Jonas listened to this story in undisguised astonishment, and it was probably new to him.

When Streen had finished his narrative, he turned to the young man, and addressed him in a tone of spiteful triumph.

"I reckon you will see that father o' yours afore long, Ike," said he, "and when you do I want you to say to him that Zeke Streen has kept his word and settled that little account."

"You may as well drop that kind of talk," observed Aleck Sander. "We will have to take you to Oro Fino, where this story of yours will be put in writing, and you will have to swear to it. After that you will be turned loose."

The next thing on the programme was to put all persons present, except the prisoners, under an obligation of secrecy until the objects of the expedition should be fully accomplished.

Zeke Streen was taken on to Oro Fino, and Ike Jonas and the remaining captive were left at the dug-out, guarded by Jack Halsey and two of Pete Jackson's men.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BREAKING IT GENTLY.

THERE was one person on the Jonas Ranch who rejoiced greatly in the promised reformation of Ikey and his restoration to his father's favor, and that was his mother.

He had always been her favorite, in spite of his wildness, and she had secretly supplied him with money for his extravagance until the source of supply was discovered and cut off.

When her husband told her of the offer he had made the young man, and its acceptance by him, she was effusive in her expressions of pleasure.

Simon Jonas was not so joyful as he was by no means confident of the success of the experiment.

He had had too severe an experience of Ikey's promises to believe readily that the reformation of his remaining son was to be counted on as a permanent thing.

It must be admitted that Ikey began well.

The first day of his assumption of duty on the ranch was devoted by him to business exclusively, and with such assiduity as could not fail to please his father.

At the same time he showed a surprising quickness in mastering the details of what he had to do, promising on that account to be of more use than his steadier but stupid brother had been.

The day was so full of promise, that the ranchman and his wife were both quite hopeful when they retired at night.

The next morning, however, the young man did not "show up" at breakfast time, and his father began to look glum and speak of him severely.

"He said last night that he might go out and look after the cattle," suggested Ike's mother. "Perhaps he did so, and has overslept himself this morning."

"He is used to that. Go and see."

A visit to Ikey's room developed the fact that the young man had not slept at home that night.

"Just as I expected," exclaimed Simon Jonas. "I might as well depend on the wind as that scawag. Oro Fino has caught him, and Oro Fino may keep him now, for all I care."

"It cannot be," remonstrated Ikey's mother. "He would not make such a promise and break it so soon. Something has happened to him."

"The usual thing, I suppose." Then the news was brought in that cattle-thieves had made another raid upon the ranch during the night, picking up and driving away a bunch of choice stock.

Mrs. Jonas at once seized upon this as a confirmation of her statements, and a justification of her fears concerning her favorite.

"That is just what I was afraid of," said she. "The poor boy has gone out to look after the cattle, and has caught those thieves at their work, and they have killed him, just as they killed that Irishman."

"That scoundrel of a Jack Halsey would be glad of a chance to kill my son," declared Simon Jonas; "but it is hardly possible that Ike would have interfered with the thieves alone. I will go and see about it."

He went with some of his men to the place from which the cattle had been taken, and made a careful investigation.

The ground near the corral was closely scrutinized, and the trail of the cattle-thieves was examined for a considerable distance; but there were no signs of a collision, bloody or otherwise.

Satisfied that Ikey had not met his death in that way or any other way, the old man returned to the house.

"You were wrong, and I was right," he said to his wife. "That young scamp did not go near those cattle-thieves, and was nowhere about the ranch last night. He went off to Oro Fino on a spree, and that's the last of his fine promises."

It was then after the hour of noon, and Simon Jonas was shortly surprised by a visit from Aleck Sander.

The detective dismounted and came into the house, where he was received rather coolly by his late employer.

"You are just the man that I wasn't expecting to see," remarked the ranchman.

"As my time is my own, I thought I could afford to give you a little of it," answered Smart Aleck.

"I don't know that I was wanting any of it very badly. What are you doing with yourself these days?"

"Lately I have been looking about for cattle-thieves."

"Not for me, I hope."

"Not for you, Mr. Jonas."

"I am glad of that. I told you that I didn't want any more such help as you had been giving me."

"And I told you that I didn't want any more such pay as you had been giving me. I also remarked at that time that I expected to do a little work of the same sort on my own account."

"You seem to have been making as poor a fist of it as ever. Some more of my cattle were run off last night."

"I know that, Mr. Jonas, and that is what I have come to speak to you about. The cattle are safe. I know where they are, and you can get them by sending for them."

"So you found them?" grunted the old man, "and now you will want me to pay you for that."

"Not a dollar. I have been paid."

"How did you happen to find them?"

"There was no happen about it. I went for the purpose. I saw the thieves take the cattle from your corral, and I followed them."

"Was my son Ike, there?" eagerly asked the ranchman. "Did he follow the rascals with you?"

"Your son Ike had nothing to do with following them."

"Then he has gone off on a spree, confound him! What became of the thieves?"

"I had plenty of help, and we followed them to their hiding-place and caught them there, as I wanted to make a sure thing of this business this time."

"That's good!" exclaimed Simon Jonas. "I suppose they were a man and a woman, and one of them rode a bay horse, and the other a black."

"Just so—the same scoundrels who have been stealing cattle from your ranch and Pete Jackson's."

"I was sure that those rascally Halseys would be brought up with a round turn some day, but did not expect you to do the job. Did you catch them both?"

"Both of the thieves."

"What did you do with them?"

"One of them is dead."

"Hung?"

"No. One of them resisted, and was shot."

"Which one was that? Not the girl?"

"It was a young man."

"Jack Halsey, then. Well, he deserved no better than shooting, and I can't say that I'm not glad he is gone."

"You are mistaken then, Mr. Jonas. The

young man who was shot was not Jack Halsey."

"Who was he, then?"

"Dave Strang, of Oro Fino."

"Are you sure of that? Why, this is astonishing. Perhaps you will want to tell me next that the girl you caught was not Jack Halsey's sister."

"There was no girl."

"No girl? Why, you told me just now—"

"That they were the same couple who have been stealing cattle about here. One of them was dressed somewhat like a girl, and he rode a black horse with a side-saddle. They were partners—Dave Strang and the other one."

Simon Jonas paused and stared until he could take in and digest this information.

"Who was the other one?" he inquired.

"Your son, Isaac Jonas!"

The blow was a terrible one.

Simon Jonas sunk back in his chair, and his arms dropped at his side, and his face turned yellow like old parchment, as he stared fixedly at the man before him, apparently not comprehending the full force of the words that had been spoken.

"What sort of a lie is this you are giving me?" he muttered, when he was able to use his tongue.

"It is no lie, Mr. Jonas, and I can overlook that sort of talk from you, under the circumstances. It is a sad and serious fact that your son was one of that pair of cattle-thieves, and Pete Jackson and several other men, who helped me to catch them, will tell you the same thing."

"Do you mean to say, Mr. Sander, that my son has been such an infernal idiot as to steal his own cattle—his father's cattle?"

"That is just what I do mean to say."

"Why should he do that?"

"To get money to pay his debts, and to spend in Oro Fino. He and Dave Strang ran off the cattle, and Zeke Streen and two other men helped to take care of the plunder and to divide the spoil. One of those men was killed; but we have got Zeke Streen and the other one safe."

"Zeke Streen?" gasped the old man.

"Your friend and partner, Zeke Streen. That brings me, Mr. Jonas, to the most important part of my errand here. Of course you will want to get your son out of that scrape and I propose to help you. All the men who were concerned in the capture have promised to keep the thing a secret, so as to give you a chance."

"What sort of a chance?"

"If you want your son to go clear, you can have your wish on one condition."

"What is that?"

"The condition is that you shall confess the part you took in hiring Zeke Streen to run Tom Halsey into a trap and get him hung."

"Why, I—I never—"

"Come, now, Mr. Jonas, don't begin by trying to make any sort of a denial. That won't do at all. I know the facts of that business, and I am not the only person who knows them. Zeke Streen has made a full confession."

"His word is worthless," feebly protested the ranchman.

"It is good enough for this, as we have other proof to back it. If you follow Zeke Streen's example, your son shall go free; if not, he will be turned over to the authorities and prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

"It will ruin me."

"Yes, for this country, and I would advise you to leave here. You are better fitted for the country you came from."

"What do you want me to do? How shall I do it?"

"Just as Zeke Streen has done. I shall want you to go with me to Oro Fino, and there your statement shall be put into writing, and you must swear to it."

"If it could be kept quiet until I can sell out and get away from here—"

"That is what shall be done. I give you my word for that. As soon as the statement is signed and sworn to, I will take you to the place where your son is, and you may carry him home, and nothing about the matter shall be made public until you have left this part of the country."

"Come on, then. I want to get over with it."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE MAN OF HER CHOICE.

AFTER his interview with Aleck Sander, Simon Jonas was obliged to fortify himself with a stiff glass of grog; but he offered no such refreshment to the bearer of bad news.

He then went to speak to his wife, who had been much excited by the visit of the detective.

"What did that man come here for, Simon?" she eagerly inquired. "Is it anything about Ikey?"

"Yes, it is just as I told you. He has gone off on a spree, and has got into a bit of a scrape, and I am going to get him out and bring him home."

"Is he hurt?"

"No—there is nobody hurt but me."

Then he mounted his horse, and rode to Oro Fino with Sander.

On the way he was moody and silent, absorbed in his own gloomy thoughts, and scarcely opening his mouth to speak, and the detective, who was by no means fond of his companion, did not urge him to talk.

At Oro Fino he was shown the statement which had been made and sworn to by Zeke Streen, and he read it carefully.

As it exactly detailed the whole of the villainous transaction which led to the death of Tom Halsey, his part of the business was easily and speedily finished.

He had only to append his affidavit to the truth of the recital already certified to by his tool, and the document was then delivered to Aleck Sander for safe-keeping.

Though it was then night, Simon Jonas was anxious to get his son and take him home, and the tireless detective consented to go with him to show him the place and make an end of the affair.

In the dug-out they found Ike and his companion, still guarded by Jack Halsey and the two cowboys.

He was given his horse to ride home, and was turned loose to go away with his father, glad to get out of the scrape so easily, though he was so completely broken up that he had not a word to say for himself.

The other captive was also turned loose, and was advised to hold his tongue and get out of the country as soon as possible, advice which he followed with the utmost diligence.

Leaving the stolen cattle to be brought away by Simon Jonas's men, the detective and his friends gladly left the hole in the hills.

In spite of his hard and wearisome work of the preceding two days and nights, Aleck Sander rode out to Small Hope Ranch the next day, having a scheme to work up there, in which he hoped to enlist the sympathy of Victoria Halsey.

He supposed that he would be an early arrival at the ranch, but Horace Exton was ahead of him.

The Englishman had let no grass grow under his feet after assisting in the capture of the cattle-thieves, and satisfying himself that the memory of Tom Halsey was cleared, but had hastened to Victoria as soon as he could get away from Oro Fino.

He had no news to carry there, of course, as Jack Halsey had preceded him, but he naturally expected to find his profit in the good tidings that had been received.

Mrs. Halsey, who could easily guess why he had come, and who favored his suit, got out of the way, and left him a clear field.

He began operations with a point-blank volley.

"Well, Victoria, I have come to marry you."

"Indeed, sir?" was the young lady's astonished reply.

"Not just this moment, perhaps; but I am going to marry you as soon as you will set the day, and I hope you will make it soon, which you will do as a matter of course if you are fond of me, and I know you are."

"You had better sit down, Mr. Exton, and try to calm yourself, as you seem to be excited about something. Have you made another blast and struck another vein?"

"I have struck it rich right here, and mean to stick to my claim."

"Jack has brought us some good news, and I hope it is all true."

"Every word of it. Zeke Streen and Simon Jonas have both confessed, and the confession is in black and white and sworn to. The two cattle-thieves have been caught, and all you wanted to have done is done and settled, and now I want to know when you are going to marry me."

"For that, do you mean? If I should marry anybody for that, it ought to be Mr. Sander, who has done more than any of you to bring about that result."

"That's a fact. He is a splendid fellow, and I am ever so much obliged to him for his good work. But he has made no claim, you know, and mine was put in some time ago. You told me to wait until those matters were settled, and now they are settled, and I want to know when you are going to marry me."

"If I should marry you, Mr. Exton, it would be for some other reason than because you have helped us in that matter."

"Of course it would. You mean to marry me because you are fond of me. I know that. When is it to be?"

"Would you really be willing to marry a cattle-thief? You know that I stole cattle."

"Your style of stealing cattle suits me exactly, and it has been the one desire of my life to marry a woman who could steal cattle. So that matter is settled, and all is settled, except the wedding day. I want that fixed, you see, because the Hole in the Ground is doing splendidly, and I must know where to build a house for us."

It was clear to Victoria that there was no use in trying to put off this man or evade his importunity; but she made one more effort.

"All is not fully settled yet, Mr. Exton. My

father's name will not be cleared until Simon Jonas leaves the country, and his confession is made public."

"And then you'll marry me?"

"Then I will marry you, if you insist upon it."

"That is all right, and I will do my best to hustle old Jonas out. I have a great mind to buy his property, so as to get rid of him. I shall buy the part that covers the Hole in the Ground, anyhow."

The window was open, and the latter part of the conversation was overheard by Aleck Sander, who was coming to the house just then, accompanied by Jack Halsey.

He stopped suddenly, and turned pale.

"What's the matter?" inquired Jack.

"Did you hear that?" whispered the detective as he drew his young friend aside. "Exton is in there with your sister, and she says that she is going to marry him."

"That is nothing new. I have been expecting it for some time. He has been on the trail for quite a while."

"I did not know that. I thought I might stand a chance there, and I hoped—but that is no matter. The game has gone against me, and it can't be helped."

"I am so sorry, Mr. Sander. I wish it could have been you, and perhaps—"

"There is no perhaps about it. I came in too late. That is just my luck. It is clear that Exton is the man of her choice. Let us go in and congratulate them."

They went in, and Smart Aleck played his part manfully, suffering no sign of his disappointment to escape him.

"I am glad," said he, "that Miss Halsey will have a good husband to keep her out of trouble. I wanted to apply for the position myself; but Exton has got ahead of me, and I can only envy him his good fortune."

From his manner of speaking it was hard to tell whether he was in jest or earnest. His congratulations were pleasantly accepted, and he was assured of the deep and enduring gratitude of his friends at Small Hopes Ranch.

Horace Exton did not have to wait long for his wedding-day, as Simon Jonas soon sold out his property in that region, and removed with his family to scenes for which, as Smart Aleck told him, he was better fitted.

He sold out at satisfactory figures, too, as the Oro Fino district was "booming" just then, and a good ranch was worth good money.

Exton and his partner secured the tract in which the Hole in the Ground was located, and the yield of the mine exceeded their best anticipations.

Not until after the departure of the tribe of Jonas was the double confession made public; but the complicity of Ike Jonas and Dave Strang in cattle-stealing operations had already leaked out.

Zeke Streen had slipped away from Oro Fino as soon as he was "turned loose," and with him went Kitty Delavergne, and neither of them was seen in that district again.

Aleck Sander did not remain to witness Victoria Halsey's wedding, as his engagements called him northward.

After their marriage the young couple made Oro Fino their home until Exton's house could be finished, and Jack Halsey and his mother were left to manage the Small Hopes Ranch.

THE END.

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